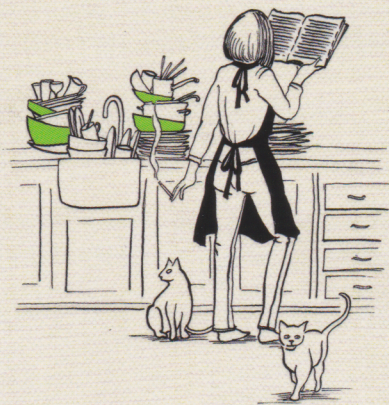




the PUBLIC  
CONFESSIONS OF  
A MIDDLE-AGED  
WOMAN (AGED 55<sup>3/4</sup>)  
Sue Townsend



'Proof, once more, that Townsend is one of the  
funniest writers around' *The Times*







'The publishers could offer a money back guarantee if you don't laugh and be sure they wouldn't have to write a single cheque'  
Jeremy Paxman

'A classic. The Adrian Mole diaries are thoroughly subversive. A true hero for our time' Richard Ingrams

'The real greatness of Townsend's creation comes from the gap between aspiration and reality. Adrian Mole is one of literature's great underachievers; his tragedy is that he knows it and the sadness of this undercuts the humour and makes us laugh not until, but while, it hurts' *Daily Mail*

'Adrian Mole is one of the great comic characters of our time ... (Townsend) never writes a sentence which doesn't ring true; she never gets Adrian's voice wrong or attributes a thought or feeling to him which strikes one as false. Whatever happens, we may be sure that new troubles will assail Adrian, that new disasters will threaten, but that he will survive them all. Like Evelyn Waugh's Captain Grimes, Adrian is "one of the immortals" and the series of his diaries the comic masterpiece of our time' *Sportsman*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Townsend was born in Leicester in 1946. Despite not learning to read until the age of eight, leaving school at fifteen with no qualifications and having three children by the time she was in her mid-twenties, she always found time to read widely. She also wrote secretly for twenty years. After joining a writers' group at the Phoenix Theatre, Leicester, she won a Thames Television award for her first play, *Wombling*, and became a professional playwright and novelist.

Since the publication of *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13¾* thirty years ago, Sue has made the nation laugh and sometimes pricked its conscience. She has written seven further volumes of Adrian's diaries and six other popular novels – including *Queen Camilla* and *Number Ten* – and numerous well-received plays. She still lives in Leicester, and today is widely regarded as Britain's favourite comic writer.

# The Public Confessions of a Middle-aged Woman

SUE TOWNSEND



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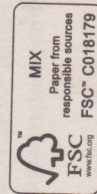
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## Introduction

This collection of monthly pieces represents a sort of sanitized autobiography and is carefully entitled the *Public Confessions*. (The *Private Confessions* will never be written.) Before I wrote the first column, I made a few rules for myself.

- I would not exploit members of my family.
- I would not write about dogs or cats.
- I would not quote taxi drivers.
- I would steer clear of using the personal pronouns: I, Me, Myself.

I have broken most of these rules in every column I write. My husband features heavily in these pages as a long-suffering but patient man. Bill and Max (dog and cat respectively) appear in later columns more often than I would like, and a quote from a taxi driver called Elias got both me and him in trouble with that Great Man, the ludicrous Jeffrey Archer.

Elias and I got to know each other well as we crossed and re-crossed the Greek island of Skyros, from airport to harbour, in a search for my lost husband. During one journey Elias told me that once he was hired by Jeffrey Archer to drive him, Mary and their guests on a trawl of the Skyrian pottery shops. Apparently, the Great Man has an impressive collection, though it has to be said that not everybody



shares his taste. Elias would meet the great man's yacht at the harbour, and off they would go. Naturally I was intrigued and asked what the great Archer was like on his holidays. Elias said, 'Sue, he talk to me like "dog".'

I was indignant that Archer could show such disrespect to Elias (who had a genuine university degree, and good manners, unlike Archer).

I felt a prick of unease when I wrote this. When I next returned to Skyros I was astonished to be told by Elias that Archer had rung him from England to complain.

'I don't care, Sue,' said Elias, laughing, 'He is pig.'

I agreed to work for Sainsbury's *The Magazine* after a delightful dinner at the RAC club with Delia Smith and the editor, Michael Wynn-Jones. I had never met either of them before. All I knew was that they were starting a new magazine and wanted to talk to me about it. My heart sank at the phrase 'new magazine'.

This innocent-sounding phrase is usually a code. It means give me your hard-earned money, I will 'invest' it in setting up a publication that nobody wants to read, and after much heartbreak and hard work I will set fire to your money, and cast the burning notes into the wind. Ensuring that you will never see your money again.

There was a great deal of laughter and almost as much liquor. After saying over the soup that I couldn't possibly fit in any more work, I talked myself into it during the main course. I heard myself gush over coffee that I would be delighted to provide them with 800 words a month. 800 words was *nothing*. I could write them on the train from Leicester to St Pancras, or in the kitchen while I waited for

my rock cakes to harden in the oven. I saw myself seated at a pavement café with an elegant notepad and inky pen, honing and polishing 800 wise and witty words.

Forgive me if I larf. These 800 words have mostly been dragged out of me kicking and screaming. (Which reminds me, one of the rules was that I would also avoid clichés, like the plague.)

I don't think I have ever delivered the 800 on time. This is the most disgraceful confession of all. In fact, I have no right to call myself a professional writer. The pros get up early and go to their study. After a moment's thought they type out 800 lucid double-spaced words. After a little light editing this document is sent to the editor with a chirpy comment on a compliments slip. I'm convinced other columnists do not do as I do – lie in bed quaking with fear, gnashing my teeth, telling anyone who will listen (few lately), 'I can't do it. I've got nothing to write about.' In my own defence, and on the advice of my live-in therapist, Dr Eagleburger, I should explain that I work under certain restrictions. Magazines with high production values such as *Sainsbury's Magazine* cannot be thrown together overnight. We are a very long way from the Tortoise Society's newsletter type of thing. My words have to be written three months ahead, so topicality is out and I can't take advantage of national events.

I do hope that you enjoy these pieces. Personally, me, myself, I haven't been able to re-read them again.

Sue Townsend  
Leicester  
July 2001



## Aga Saga

Two years ago I saw my first Aga. It was in the home of a mad journalist and was covered in twenty years of accumulated grease but it was love at first sight. The warmth, the strength, the classic lines, the fact that Agas are always hot and ready for action appealed to me. The Aga has many of the qualities one would like, but so rarely gets, from a lover.

I sent for a brochure and slobbered over it for days. I became conversant with Aga terminology, 'the two-oven', 'the four-oven', 'the simmering plate'. Eventually the decision was made. I rang up the supplier and tried to order a 'two-oven in cream please'. A voice on the other end of the phone informed me that an interview would be necessary first to see if I was 'suitable'. You'd have thought I'd been trying to adopt a baby or get a boy into Eton.

As the day of my interview drew near, I began to worry. Would the supplier consider me and my husband suitable owners? We drank and smoked and kept late hours. Would we be *turned down*?

We needn't have worried, the supplier was not interested in our morals or our views on apartheid. He merely busied himself with a tape measure, asked a few pertinent questions about the chimney flue, took a deposit and left.

Cunningly I was away from home during the run-up



to the installation, the flue had to be lined, fitted units ripped out, the kitchen floor strengthened, and a gas pipe re-routed. When I returned my husband and I stood arm in arm and looked at the gap where the Aga would be. Like first-time expectant parents we talked about how our lives would change.

I was also away on the day it was installed but I phoned throughout the day, anxious for news of its progress. At 6 p.m. my daughter answered and in gloomy tones she said, 'It's in, it's horrible, and I'm scared of it.' You'd have thought she was describing an evil monster. My husband came on the phone. 'I love it,' he enthused. 'I can't take my hands off it, it's beautiful.' I felt a twinge of jealousy and hurried home to meet my rival, Ms Aga. And there she was, all gleaming chrome and cream bodywork: the Marilyn Monroe of the cooker world. My husband was already her slave, producing cheese scones and chocolate sponge cakes from her sultry depths. He was a man besotted.

A few days later we received an invitation to a 'New Aga Owners evening'. There was to be a cookery demonstration and the 'opportunity' to buy some Aga cookware. My husband was on the phone at once confirming our places.

The evening arrived, we dressed carefully, anxious not to look like Aga louts. We took our seats in the back row. In front of us in a mock-up kitchen was a 'four-oven' Aga. The seats began to fill up around us. It was an exceptionally well dressed audience, we would not have been out of place in the Royal Opera House. The tension grew, then

at 8 p.m. prompt the lights went down and the demonstrator welcomed us to the show.

Within seconds my husband and I were giggling uncontrollably – the woman had the most extraordinary voice. She would start a sentence sounding like the Queen, and finish with an impression of Pauline Fowler from *EastEnders*. We managed to pull ourselves together after five minutes but by then it was clear that the demonstrator was using this cookery demonstration as a sort of free therapy session.

As she handed out sausage rolls fresh from the oven, she related sad tales of her teenagers' outrages and confided that her husband refused to use the Aga, couldn't boil an egg, and spent most of his time in the pub. However, her smile never slipped and the food she turned out was delicious.

My husband's romance with Ms Aga is still on, although she is not as young as she was. She's stained and scratched but she's always there, ready for him. And when he shouts, 'Darling I'm home,' as he comes through the door, I'm not sure whom he's greeting.



## War on Slugs

A bad week; first I had a letter from a bankrupt Bulgarian an ex-private eye, who threatened to shoot himself unless I sent him \$28,000 (I'm not making this up!), and now the slugs have launched their summer campaign. If you denote a slight paranoia in my reference to slugs, I can just say in my defence that last year I came down to find slug trails, not only in my garden but in my living room!

They had promenaded past one sofa, circled the coffee table, and then headed towards the television and video. I felt like the Last of the Mohicans as I followed their gliding tracks but, unlike our American Indian brothers and sisters (who love all living things), I had only hatred in my heart for the squelching molluscs. I poked a toastin' fork under the television table (bought in a moment of madness – a tastefully written card on it had said, 'Antique TV and Video Stand'). After poking about fruitlessly, I gave up and concluded the slugs had had a good look around and gone back into the garden to feast on my tender young plants – possibly to punish me for my bad taste in furniture.

I used to be known for my gormlessness, my refusal to think badly of anyone, my passivity, but slugs have changed my character.

After the living-room incident, I toughened up. I turned



into a serial killer. I read up on slugs and gathered the tools of destruction: cans of lager, empty Diet Coke bottles, slug pellets, a torch, a new pair of washing-up gloves and a child's bucket and spade.

First, I laid my lager trap: half of an inverted Diet Coke bottle (top downwards and tightly screwed) was sunk into the earth. A quarter of a pint of lager was poured inside, then the rim of the bottle was cunningly disguised with good, soft soil. I then drank the rest of the lager.

When darkness fell I went inside, to write and to wait. It was hard to concentrate. I was nervous. After all, it was the first time I'd planned a mass murder.

It was around midnight when I tiptoed into the garden, wearing the rubber gloves and carrying the torch. Me and the slugs keep late hours. We walk on the wild side. I heard them first, a horrible sound of unbridled greed. They were gorging on my plants, tearing at them with their thousands of teeth. I switched the torch on and caught them in the beam. If they'd been humans, they'd have raised their hands in the air and said, 'It's a fair cop, guv,' but being slugs they ignored me and carried on destroying the tender nicotiana plants I'd grown from seed. Enraged, I hurried to fetch my little spade meant for making sand-castles, but now about to be used for a less innocent pastime – that of ferrying slugs to their death. On my way, I passed the lager pit. Slugs were gathered around the rim like boozers at a bar, others had fallen in and were drunk or dead. I'm not sure, but I may have cackled.

My next patrol was at 3 a.m. when more victims were claimed. It was a night of revenge and retribution. Dawn

was breaking when I eventually crawled into bed, tired but triumphant. But sleep evaded me. I was tormented by the thought that although I had culled dozens, there must be hundreds, if not thousands of them still out there. It was then that the slug obsession began to take hold of me.

The next day, my children came round and found me counting the dead. They were horrified. There were cries of, 'How cruel!' and 'Poor things!' and 'How could you?' None of my children had gardens at the time, so it was useless trying to explain to them that flowers and shrubs were superior forms of life. I kept my silence and eventually they drifted back indoors (like most young people, they distrust fresh air). When I joined them, I noticed them looking at me with a new respect. Their daffy, soft-touch mother was gone for ever. In her place was a slug-killer. A woman fully capable of refusing hand-outs, a grandmother no longer available for last-minute baby-sitting duties.

Like all obsessives, I've become a bore. I've just said to my husband, 'Did you know slugs breed by firing aphrodisiac darts into each other?' I think he muttered, 'Of course', but it may have been 'Divorce'.



## The Slob's Holiday

My husband and I went to Reno for our holiday last year. The children were alarmed. 'Isn't that where people go to get a quickie divorce?' asked my second son.

'Yes,' I said, trying to look enigmatic and interesting. 'You're not getting divorced, are you?' he asked bluntly. 'No,' I said, 'we're going to an outdoor pursuits trade fair.' The children slouched away, muttering things like 'boring'.

I have brought my children up to be polite, but I fear that they are most impolite – under their breath. I call them children, but they are all grown-up. My eldest son has started to develop fine lines around his eyes – fledgling crow's-feet. A terrible sight for any parent to see.

There isn't a word for grown-up children, though I must admit 'groanies' comes instantly to mind. Are there parents out there who think that once their children reach the age of eighteen they are off your hands? Excuse me while I laugh, a cynical, dry, mirthless kind of laugh. I, too, thought as you did. Eighteen was the magical number in my mind as I endeavoured to pack my groceries at Sainsbury's, while one or more of my children had a spectacular tantrum under the trolley.

Anyway, this piece isn't about the damned groanies, it's about holidays. The first thing to be said about holidays is that anybody who can afford one should be grateful. The



second thing is that planning holidays can be hard work. In my household it starts with somebody muttering: 'I suppose we ought to think about a holiday.' This remark is usually made in July and is received glumly, as if the person making it has said: 'I suppose we ought to think about the Bolivian balance of payments problem.'

Nothing much happens for a week and then the potential holiday-makers are rounded up and made to consult their diaries. Hospital appointments are taken into consideration, as are important things to do with work. But other highlights on the domestic calendar, such as the cat's birthday, are swept aside and eventually two weeks are found. The next decision is the most painful: where?

We travel abroad to work quite a lot but we return tired and weary, so the holiday we are planning is a slob's holiday: collapse on a sunbed, read a book until the sun goes down, stagger back to hotel room, shower, change into glad rags, eat well, drink well, wave goodbye to teenagers, have last drink on hotel terrace, go to bed then lie awake and wait for hotel waiters to bring teenagers home from disco.

I never want to be guided around another monument, as long as I live. I do not want to be told how many bricks it took to build the damned thing. I have a short attention span for such details.

I also want to live dangerously and get brown. I want to see my doughy English skin change from white sliced to wheat germ. I like the simple pleasure of removing my watch strap and gazing at the patch of virgin skin beneath. I do not want to attend a 'folk evening' ever, ever again.

The kind where men with their trousers tucked into their socks wave handkerchiefs in the direction of women wearing puff-sleeved blouses, long skirts and headscarves.

I don't want to make new friends on holiday; I can't manage the ones I have at home. I do not want to mix with the locals and I have no wish to go into their homes. I do not welcome tourists who come to Leicester into my home. Why should the poor locals in Holidayland be expected to? Isn't it bad enough that we monopolize their beaches, clog their pavements and spend an hour in a shop choosing a sunhat that costs the equivalent of 75 pence?

So, the slob's holiday has several essential requirements: a hotel on a sandy beach, a balcony, good food, a warm sea, nightlife for the teenagers, a big crowd to get lost in, and an absence of mosquitoes. It's so tiring applying that repellent. I would also prefer it to be in a Muslim country where all the beautiful women are clad from head to toe in black. On this point my husband and I disagree.

As I write, we are still at the planning stage. We have looked through all the holiday brochures, but they are full of references to 'hospitable locals', 'folk nights', 'deserted beaches' and 'interesting historical sights'.

Not our cup of tea, or glass of sangria, at all. We slobs of the world must unite (if we can find the energy). We have nothing to lose, except our torpor.



## My Vivienne Westwood Is Gone

When I was a child I was warned to keep away from the gypsies who used to set up a summer camp at the side of a little river in our neighbourhood.

I was an obedient child so I didn't actually go *inside* the traditional caravans and take tea with the gypsies, but I got as near as I could and became fascinated by their way of life. It seemed idyllic: the children ran free, they didn't have to go to school, they were allowed to ride bareback on their horses and ponies, and, by the look of things, they didn't have to wash or brush their hair in the mornings.

The adult gypsies seemed to enjoy life. The women washed their clothes in the river and hung them on the hedgerows to dry. I liked the idea of cooking on a campfire. I liked the gaudy clothes they wore.

On Coronation Day, I dressed up as a gypsy for the fancy dress competition. I wore a bandanna round my head on which my mother had sewn a dozen curtain rings. The rest of the costume was a strange hybrid of Romany Gypsy and Pearly Queen.

I carried a basket of clothes pegs and bashed like crazy on a tambourine until an irritable adult told me to stop. I didn't win. There were enough gypsies in the competition to start up our own encampment.



The winner was my sister Barbara who was a most original and convincing doll in a box. When the judges came round she didn't bat her long eyelashes, not once. Though she's batted them a few times since.

So, I've always had a soft spot for gypsies. I've defended them from people who accuse them of despoiling the countryside.

But I have been writing about our decent British gypsies. Last week, in Barcelona, I encountered quite a different type.

I was sitting at a pavement café, I had just changed some money and had mucho pesetas. My beautiful Vivienne Westwood bag was between my feet (I knew that Barcelona was bag-snatch heaven). It had taken me three weeks to pluck up the courage to buy that bag. It was an oblong of black leather, with long shoulder straps and a beautiful gold interior.

Inside the bag were (note the past tense): a navy blue passport, an aeroplane ticket, a large A4 notepad, three credit cards, pens, mucho pesetas, a Swiss army knife, a cosmetic bag, a bottle of insulin and syringes, a tube of Ambre Solaire, a litre bottle of water (it was a big bag), photographs, plus the usual debris that all the women I know have at the bottom of their bags – buttons, safety pins, tissues, eyebrow tweezers, spent matches, till receipts, a scrap of paper with the date of the parents' evening written on it, two Paracetamols in a blister pack and a twisted paperclip used for emergency manicures. As you must have guessed by now, the Barcelonian gypsies parted me from the bag and its contents.

Here's how they did it. They swooped on me. There were three fat women and two thin children. One woman pushed a distressed-looking carnation down my equally distressed-looking cleavage. The other women distracted my companions. I pulled the carnation out of the front of my T-shirt and handed it back to the woman. She pushed it back. The carnation went to and fro like Elizabeth Taylor's divorce lawyer.

Eventually the woman accepted the fact that I was not going to buy the withered carnation and she went away, but not before cursing me loudly and banging on the table.

My companions and I laughed until I went for my bag and found a sickening space between my feet.

The gypsies had been gone for at least five minutes. There was a pause and somebody said, 'Well they'll be celebrating around the campfire tonight.' It might even have been me.

I encountered such kindness from the Barcelona police I almost forgot that the last time I'd encountered them they had been clubbing a young man half to death with their batons.

In the unlikely event that those thieving ragged, tagged gypsies are reading this article, please remind me when it's the next parents' evening.

And in the more likely event that Vivienne Westwood is reading – I suggest that her next collection could be the gypsy look. They've already got the handbag.



## Avoidance Activity

I am in Birmingham sitting in a café opposite a hairdresser's. I'm trying to find the courage to go in and book an appointment. I've been here three-quarters of an hour and I'm on my second large cappuccino. The table I'm sitting at has a wobble like a choirboy's Adam's apple. Consequently, I've spilt some of the first cup of coffee and most of the second down the white trousers I was so proud of as I swanked in front of the mirror in my hotel room this morning.

I can see the hairdressers, or stylists as they prefer to be called, as they work. There is a man with a ponytail who is perambulating around the salon, stopping now and then to frown and grab a hank of customer's hair. There are two girl stylists: one has had her white blonde hair shaved and then allowed it to explode into hundreds of hedgehog's quills; the other has hair any self-respecting woman would *scalp* for: thick and lustrous. All three are dressed in severe black. Even undertakers allow themselves to wear a little white at the neck and cuffs, but undertakers don't take their work half as seriously, and there lies the problem. I'm afraid of hairdressers.

When I sit in front of the salon mirror stuttering and blushing and saying that I don't quite know what I want,



I know I am the client from hell. Nobody is going to win 'Stylist of the Year' with me as a model.

'Madam's hair is very th . . .'; they begin to say 'thin', think better of it and change it to 'fine' – ultimately coming out with the hybrid word 'thine'. I have been told my hair is 'thine' many times. Are they taught to use it at college? Along with other conversational openings, depending on the season:

- 1 Done your Christmas shopping?
- 2 Going away for Easter?
- 3 Booked your summer holiday?
- 4 You're brown, been away?
- 5 Nights are drawing in, aren't they?
- 6 Going away for Christmas?

I'm hopeless at small talk (and big talk); I'm also averse to looking at my face in a mirror for an hour and a half. The result is that I sound evasive and look furtive. I behave as though I'm a prisoner on the run: James Cagney in lip-stick and hooped earrings.

I've looked at wigs in stores, but I'm too shy to try them on, and I still remember the horror of watching a bewigged man jump into a swimming pool and then seeing what looked like the corpse of a medium-sized rodent break the surface and float brazenly on the water. He snatched at his wig, thrust it anyhow on top of his head and left the pool. I didn't see him for the rest of the holiday, perhaps he was skulking in his hotel room reliving the nightmare moment when he forgot the hair on his head was not his own, but had been purchased over a shop counter.

There is a behavioural trait that a lot of writers share – it is called avoidance activity. They will do anything to avoid starting to write: swig vodka, clean a drain, phone their senile uncle in Peru, change the cat's litter tray. I'm prone to this myself: in summer, I deadhead the flowers, even lobelia; in winter I'll keep a fire going, stick by stick, anything to put off the moment of scratching marks on virgin paper.

I'm indulging in avoidance activity right now. I've just ordered another cappuccino. I've tried giving myself a severe talking to: For God's sake woman! You're forty-seven years of age. Just cross the road, push the salon door open, and ask for an appointment!

It didn't work. I'm now in my hotel room, and have just given myself a do-it-yourself hairdo, which consisted of a shampoo, condition and trim, with the scissors on my Swiss army knife.

I can't wait to get back to the Toni & Guy salon in Leicester. The staff there haven't once called my hair 'thine' and they can do wonders with the savagery caused by Swiss army knife scissors.

This article is forty-nine words short and my brain has gone dead. To avoid writing, I took a pencil and obliterated the bags under my eyes, so evident in the picture in last month's Sainsbury's *The Magazine*. It would improve my self-esteem no end if you, kind reader, would do the same.



## Control Freak? Moi?

I'm sitting on a plane at Edinburgh airport watching the luggage handlers at work. I'm fascinated by one man in particular. He is tall and has only half a head of hair. He has the lugubrious face of a natural comedian. In between throwing luggage into the hold he is afflicted by several minor inconveniences. A loose thread from his clothing wafts about, touching his face. He tries to grab at the thread, but he is wearing padded industrial gloves and so the thread continues to elude him. Then a fly lands on his chest. He brushes it off, it lands on his arm, his shoulder, his neck. The man curses, I can see his lips moving. He then starts to sneeze. I can't hear the sneeze because I am cocooned inside the plane, but I can tell from the way his body is jack-knifing that the sneezes are violent and noisy. During a lull in the sneezing the man pushes out a handkerchief, it falls to the ground and is blown away across the runway. He turns the conveyor belt off and chases the handkerchief. While his back is turned a red sports bag throws itself off the conveyor and rolls *under* the conveyor. The man catches up with his handkerchief, blows his nose vigorously and returns to his work.

I look down at the red sports bag. I am anxious now. Will the man notice it? Should I report it to somebody? I know there is a Scottish international football referee on



the plane. Is the bag his? Does it contain the vital tools of his trade? The luggage man continues with his work, battling occasionally at the thread, the fly and now his hair because the wind has stiffened and his remaining hair is being blown forward into his eyes.

I am willing the man to look down and see the red sports bag, but his attention is elsewhere. A colleague has joined him and they are now sharing a joke. My man bends double with laughter, then has a coughing fit. His colleague strolls away and my man swats at the invisible thread, the fly which has returned, and his intractable hair.

The pilot announces that final checks are being made and that we are due to depart within a few minutes. My man outside doesn't appear to know this. He has slowed down. He is rubbing the small of his back and grimacing. Now his bootlace has come undone, he stops the conveyer, puts his boot on the side and re-ties the lace. He takes his time and although the sports bag must be within his line of vision, he appears not to notice it. The pilot rambles on, talking about the weather in London. He tells us his name, which I immediately forget, but I do know that it is a reassuring name, something like Peter Worthington, David Morgan or Chris Parker. Good, solid names.

I'd put good money on it that they don't let you into pilot training college if you have a flashy, unreliable-sounding name. And, personally, I'd rather not have a Spike De Maurier at the controls as we encounter turbulence over the Alps. I know this is illogical and unfair, but as the plane falls out of the sky I want a Peter, a David or

a Chris to tell me that 'We'll soon be passing through this small spot of bother'.

My man outside is in pain, not metaphysical pain, but physical. Every time he picks up a suitcase, he looks to be in agony. I've got some strong painkillers in my bag and I long to leave the plane and give him a couple (and at the same time to point out the damned red sports bag).

This article was going to be about our holiday in Cyprus where, yes, despite swearing never to again, we ended up watching the wretched folk dancing *and* wandering around ruins in temperatures similar to that of a space craft re-entering the earth's atmosphere. We also went to see Aphrodite's pool, where the Goddess was reputed to conduct her ablutions. It was not breathtakingly beautiful being surrounded by empty fag packets and faded Coke cans.

However, enough of that. How's our man doing with the luggage? There are now only three bags to load and the red sports bag is still there, unnoticed, under the conveyer. Shall I knock on my porthole window and try to alert my man? Me? A control freak? Never.



## The Hilton Apron Mystery

My sister Kate drove me down to Heathrow and I sat beside her putting the final touches to a film script. She parked outside International Departures, I wrote 'The End', handed the scruffy pages to her and ran inside to catch a plane to Australia. I had only a small bag and it was mostly full of crumpled, dirty clothes. When I arrived at my hotel, the Perth Hilton, I reached eagerly for the laundry list. I reproduce the list below. The prices are in Australian dollars, but the prices aren't what caused me to laugh out loud.

Dress	\$13.50
Skirt	\$8.50
Jacket	\$10.50
Blouse	\$8.00
Slacks	\$8.50
Jeans	\$8.50
Tracksuit	\$15.50
Apron	\$8.50
Woollens	\$8.50



Did you spot it? *Apron*. What kind of woman is it who takes an apron to a five-star hotel? Picture the scene. This woman arrives at reception, she checks in, is given a key. A porter is summoned. He takes her bag, shows her to the lift, they chat. He leads the way to the room, opens the door, the woman gasps. The room is sumptuous; the bathroom is spotless; the towels are virgin white; and the marble surfaces sparkle. The porter shows her the minibar and opens the sliding doors. The woman steps on to the terrace and looks at the view. She then hands him a tip and he goes.

She puts her clothes away, then takes a bath, dries herself and wraps herself in the white bathrobe she finds behind the bathroom door. She fixes herself a gin and tonic, then makes several international telephone calls. The woman is talking to her employees, checking the fluctuations of various financial institutions.

After discussing a deal worth several million yen, she finds she has a couple of hours before her first business meeting with a Perth property developer. She goes on to the terrace and looks over at the land she intends to buy. It is on the bank of the Swan River; she intends to build a tasteful theme park there.

However, conscious that she is encroaching on a man's world, she looks at the aprons she has brought with her. All six are attractive but she selects the blue one with the fluffy kitten on the front. She puts it on then takes out a large toiletry bag. Inside is Mr Sheen, a duster, a scrubbing brush and a bottle of Windolene. The woman proceeds to clean the already immaculate room. Then, throwing the

dirty apron into the laundry bag, she showers and dresses in her power suit, picks up her briefcase and goes out to buy herself a slice of Perth's redevelopment.

As she passes reception, the concierge hands her a sheath of faxes. She glances at them as she settles into the back seat of her hired limousine. Apparently there is a small apron factory for sale in the north of England. She picks up the car phone and speaks to Edgar Harbottle, the managing director of Feminine Aprons Ltd. After a brief negotiation she buys the company. Mr Harbottle says, 'I don't think you'll regret it, madam. Women will always need aprons, even in these post-feminist days.'

The woman is surprised at Mr Harbottle's grasp of sexual politics. He hadn't sounded like a man with such fine sensibilities. The driver of the limousine turns round and leers, 'I like to see my missis in an apron, at the sink; gets me all of a doo-da, know whaddi mean, Sheila?' He winks a horrible, salacious wink and the woman brusquely orders him to keep his eyes on the road, and tells him that her name is Eve, not Sheila. The democratic driver is not intimidated by the woman's refined English accent. 'Nah,' he says, 'women are all the same with a bag over their heads and wearing an apron.'

After a successful meeting the woman returns to her room, puts another apron on and cleans the bath and washbasin. She then throws this essential garment into the laundry bag and writes '2' in the box marked 'Apron'.

This story is, of course, a fantasy, but the Perth Hilton laundry list is fact. Explanations on a postcard, please.



## Don't Become a Writer

Can anybody tell me why I want to work in the film industry? I recently finished the eleventh rewrite of a film, sent it off, heard nothing for three weeks, then had an enthusiastic phone call from Producer A – 'Very good.' To be followed three days later by an unenthusiastic phone call from Producer B – 'Needs more work.'

Who do I listen to, A or B? Is A lying? Does B secretly hate me? Will I be rewriting this film when my teeth are in a glass at the side of my bed and my Zimmer frame is within reach? Will the warden of my sheltered housing unit ask condescendingly, 'And when is this film you're writing going to be on our screens, Mrs Townsend?'

There is a trough of despair that most writers fall into at some stage. I'm in it now. My trough is the Grand Canyon. I fantasize about working in a biscuit factory, packing the Bourbon Creams, clocking in, clocking off and having a life. Do biscuit packers lie awake at night worrying about their work? Do they fret about the moment when the public tear away the packaging and see the Bourbon Creams nestling in their crinkly nests, next to the Vanilla Wafers and Ginger Nuts?

Do they imagine harsh criticism like, 'These Bourbon Creams are an utter disgrace; whoever packed these is a moron. I am writing to the manufacturers at once!'



Perhaps a few, but not many.

Many years ago I was asked by an American producer to go to Hollywood for six weeks. He wanted me to 'inject some humour' into an existing film script. I didn't get to read the script, because I didn't go. But I still have this image of myself lying by a pool with a bottle labelled 'Humour', using a hypodermic syringe and injecting humour into lines of dialogue. I imagined other writers with bottles labelled 'Pathos', 'Drama' and 'Structure', doing the same thing.

When I sit down to watch a film on television the room empties. My family scatter. I am a terrible viewer. I sneer, mock and swear at the screen. 'As if she'd do that!' I shout, as the heroine goes down the unlit cellar steps, straight into the arms of the axe murderer.

But in my heart of hearts, I know why the writer wrote that scene. The poor, demented creature was probably on the fifteenth rewrite and was by then incapable of thinking up anything more original. In fact only yesterday I wrote:

*Scene 79. Interior. Cellar steps. Night.*

*Eleanor walks down the cellar steps carrying a candle. It goes out.*

Which is bad enough. I haven't yet written:

*Scene 90. Exterior. Dark alley. Night.*

*The villain's car speeds down the narrow alley. John Hero flattens himself against the wall. The car crashes into cardboard boxes, which seem to be brand new and empty.*

Or even worse . . .

*Scene 100. Interior. Empty warehouse. Day.*

*The villain and John Hero run up and down stairs, creep about and then have a fight for ten boring minutes.*

But I may be driven to it. In fact I can definitely feel a car chase coming on, climaxing in a crash and a ball of flames. Producers seem to like them. I know thousands of readers would cut a limb off to see their unpublished articles, novels and film scripts published and performed. Can I urge a little caution? Before you buy the Jiffy bag and stamps and queue up at the post office, take a moment to answer the following questions:

- a Do I want to be happy?
- b Do I want my family to like me?
- c Do I want to be described on hospital radio as 'our local scribbler'?
- d Do I want to pay a literary agent 10 per cent of my income for the rest of my life?
- e If successful, do I want to be loathed by other professional writers?
- f If unsuccessful, do I want to be loathed by other professional writers?
- g Do I want to see unflattering photographs of myself in the local paper?

If you have answered 'yes' to all these questions, then you should go ahead and post your damn manuscript. But don't come whining to me when you're rewriting your car chase scene for the fifteenth time.



## resents Problems

hanging inside the cellar door. For a moment, and then I 3, and the horrible memory the bag were:

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## Christmas Presents Problems

I've just found a plastic bag hanging inside the cellar door. The bag's contents baffled me for a moment, and then I remembered Christmas Eve 1993, and the horrible memories came flooding back. Inside the bag were:

- 1 A replica of a Forties-style radio
- 2 A presentation box of sealing wax, ribbon and a seal-stamp engraved with the letter B
- 3 A pair of clip-on silver earrings
- 4 A pair of wide long-leg jeans, size 12
- 5 An opened bag of party poppers

Have you heard about the awful woman who does her Christmas shopping in the January sales? Does such an appalling woman exist, or is she an urban myth? Everybody seems to know one of these unnatural paragons, although nobody so far has confessed to being her.

I am seriously thinking of becoming her myself. I cannot take the strain of being a last-minute Christmas shopper ever again. And when I say last minute, that is exactly what I mean.

I was in WHSmith's at 5.30 p.m. on Christmas Eve when the tills were switched off, I was ushered towards the door and the lights went out. I staggered into the near-deserted shopping mall and sat on a bench muttering to



myself, surrounded by a slithering mountain of shopping bags. I am surprised that a charity didn't offer me a bed for the night. A gang of drunken young men walked by and laughed at my hat. (When I got home and looked in the mirror I understood why – something peculiar had happened to the brim.)

I started Christmas shopping in November in New Zealand, so nobody can say I didn't try. I carted three very attractive throws back to England, together with a 4ft-long wooden Maori war canoe – but that's another story. I then went mad in a trinket shop in Covent Garden; how smug I must have sounded as I announced to the indifferent assistant, 'I'm doing my Christmas shopping early this year.'

How happy I was on the train going back to Leicester, as I gloated over the presents I'd bought, convinced that I'd got the Christmas shopping beast under control.

I compare the self-satisfied woman on the train in November to the pitiful wreck on the bench on Christmas Eve, and ask myself what went wrong. My family have various theories . . .

- 1 I'm a masochist; I enjoy the pain
- 2 I'm addicted to adrenalin
- 3 I'm a lazy slob
- 4 I'm a workaholic
- 5 I'm a drama queen
- 6 I'm the opposite of an anal retentive. Nobody knows the correct psychological term, but it's something disgusting, no doubt

As you may have noticed, I write lists compulsively, but as the days tick by towards Christmas Day, my lists become increasingly complicated. Do the children's presents add up to the same value? When wrapped, will they have the same satisfying bulk? Was one son serious about wanting a flying lesson for Christmas? Was the other son hinting or merely telling the truth when he informed me that his rock-climbing rope was frayed? Could I cast aside my feminist principles and buy a sewing machine for one daughter and a set of French ovenware for another?

On Christmas Eve 1993 I forgot every principle I've ever held: at around 4.30 p.m. I stood in a queue in Woolworth's, holding two bridal Barbie dolls and two pairs of toddler-size Mr Blobby socks. I can only plead temporary insanity, and report that on Christmas Day my granddaughters both stripped Barbie of her wedding frock, saying they preferred her in the nude. I suspect that the Mr Blobby socks have been pushed to the back of a drawer.

It was a traditional sort of Christmas Day: the record tokens were thrown away with the rubbish, the grandchildren played all day with the cheapest present (Plasticine) and the roast potatoes wouldn't brown, but I had been deeply scarred by the last-minute shopping.

*Dad* If you're reading this, the replica Forties radio was meant for you. It was made in Taiwan and after I put in the batteries that's all I could hear: Taiwanese. That's why you ended up with the book tokens.

*Barbara* The silver clip earrings refused to clip on to anything.



*Husband* What would you have done with the sealing wax and ribbon?

The wide-leg jeans I bought for myself – a mistake. I look like Charlie Chaplin in them, but I've lost the receipt. The party poppers were faulty: when the strings were pulled, something like multi-coloured cat litter covered the kitchen floor.

## Janet and John

I was eight years old before I could read. My teacher was a despot. I will call her Mrs X. (She died long ago, but I am still afraid of her.) Her method of teaching reading was to give every child in the class a copy of *Janet and John* and have us point to each word, then chant it aloud. The stories in *Janet and John* were not exactly riveting. Daddy would go off in the morning, wearing his trilby, overcoat and gloves, carrying a strange bag which I now know to be a briefcase. Daddy always wore the same clothes, even in summer. Mummy would wave him goodbye. She usually wore a pretty frock, frilly apron and high heels. If she went shopping in the village she changed into a nifty suit, a felt hat and gloves, of course.

Janet and John seemed to live in the garden. They got on remarkably well, unlike most brothers and sisters I know. They had a nice, cheeky-faced dog called Spot, and they spent a lot of time shouting, 'Look, Spot, look! Look at the ball! Fetch the ball!'

When Daddy came home from work he would take off his overcoat and hat, stick a pipe between his manly teeth, sit down in a big square armchair and read the newspaper. Through the open kitchen door Mummy could be seen, smiling serenely as she prepared tea. She would then go to the kitchen door and shout, 'Come here, Janet! Come



here, John!' And Janet and John would climb down the tree, or get out of the boat (they seemed to have a river at the bottom of their garden) and Mummy and Daddy and Janet and John would have their scrumptious tea: sandwiches, jam tarts and jelly.

The table was draped with a white tablecloth, and sometimes Spot could be seen grinning cheekily from beneath it. Mummy and Daddy occasionally went into the garden, where the sun always shone, and the flowers behaved themselves and grew in perfect rows. Daddy would push the lawn mower and Mummy would hang out the washing. There was never underwear on Mummy's clothes line, but there was always a good drying wind that made the wet clothes billow and flap. Daddy's hair was never ruffled by the wind; he was a devotee of Brilliantine. In the evening, when Janet and John were in bed, Mummy and Daddy sat in a pool of light under their respective standard lamps. Mummy darned socks and Daddy smoked his pipe and did the crossword.

There is a good chance that John Major was taught to read from the *Janet and John* books. I strongly suspect that when he introduced the phrase 'Back to basics' it was their ideal ordered world he had at the back of his mind. But I have found an uncensored copy of *Janet and John* and it makes distressing reading.

*Janet and John Go into Care.* Daddy is getting ready for work. 'Where are my gloves, Mummy?' he asks. 'Look, Daddy, look, there are your gloves,' snaps Mummy, 'though why you should want to wear gloves in August defeats me!' Spot runs in and knocks Daddy's briefcase over. A copy

of *Health and Efficiency* slithers out and falls open at a picture of nudists playing tennis. John runs in, 'Look, Janet, look!' Daddy hits John on the head with his pipe, kicks Spot and leaves for work. Mummy dries her tears and walks to the village shop. She is still upset by the row with Daddy and she slips a tin of corned beef into her wicker basket.

Mummy is arrested for shoplifting. When Janet and John arrive home from school, Mummy isn't there. The front door is locked; they sit on the doorstep and wait. It starts to rain. 'Look, John, look!' says Janet eventually. 'There is Mummy.' John looks up and sees Mummy in the back of a police car.

John and Janet put Mummy to bed; she asks them to prepare their own tea. They put the kettle on the stove, then go out to play in their boat on the river. It is getting dark when they return.

'Look, Janet, look!' John is pointing to a red glow in the sky. A social worker is on the river bank. She breaks the news gently. The house has burned down, their father has run away with a woman who owns a glove shop, and their mother has been taken to the cottage hospital with shock. 'Look, Janet, look!' says John. 'We're back to basics.'



## Backbone

Hello back sufferers everywhere. I've joined the club. There is a new entry in my telephone book under C – for chiropractor. Fate struck me down the day before *The First Night* of my new play, *The Queen and I*.

Six months of bad-postured writing, which included crouching over dimly lit hotel dressing tables and scribbling on juddering Intercity 125 trains, collided with the contained hysteria of the rehearsal room. As it became clear that the play I had written would need a massive rewrite, the result of this physical and emotional collision could easily have been a nervous breakdown.

Writers are prone to going barmy, but fate decided to strike me down in quite a different way. It put me on my back by messing about with three discs and allowing one to slip out. I don't blame the disc – for forty-eight years it had been in the same place, at the bottom of my spine, doing its job uncomplainingly. Who can blame it for slipping out for a look around? But it could have chosen a dull patch to go, instead of the day of *The First Night*. Something had to be done – my sisters took me to a chiropractor.

I looked like a human question mark. Bent, but not curious. Pain takes the curiosity away. Pain is introspective, it doesn't give a damn about the rest of the world, it



concentrates on itself. Through gritted teeth, I explained that I had to attend *The First Night*. The chiropractor took x-rays of my spine and me: two worn discs and one that had gone absent without leave. He advised immediate bed rest. 'Impossible!' I said. I expect there was a note of hysteria in my voice. It is not as if I like *First Nights* – who does? The prospect of being in an auditorium with 700 people and watching them fail to laugh at your jokes is a refined form of torture. I once went to see a play of mine with seven companions, and four of them fell asleep. One of them was my husband. But, horrible as *First Nights* are, they have a compulsion. I know of no playwright who does not attend. Some stand at the back of the theatre in the dark. Some get drunk in the bar, some wander the streets nearby, and some, believe it or not, actually sit in the stalls, surrounded by their critics!

I managed to convince my bone manipulator that, if necessary, I would crawl to the theatre that night, and he graciously capitulated and took a passion-killing, flesh-pink support belt out of a drawer and wrapped it around me. My sisters took me home to bed, where I stayed until it was time to don the black velvet frock and the black velvet high heels. I staggered crab-like into the theatre and propped myself up against a stair rail. When the audience had filed in, looking excited and eager (poor deluded fools), I lay on my back on the seats in the foyer and listened to the bar staff assembling the interval drinks for the guests and critics. 'A heavy-drinking lot – put out more bottles,' said the manager, after casting a professional eye over the audience.

Two minutes before the interval, I asked a passing barman called Barry to haul me to my feet and I stood propped up against a wall, waiting for the audience to burst out of the auditorium and make its usual frantic dash to the bar. I prepared myself for the worst: that of overhearing strangers making unkind comments about the play. I didn't hear one. People were talking about the weather, Bosnia and the price of turnips, as they tend to do in the interval. After all, there is another act to be sat through, the jury is still out. My family told me that they had laughed themselves stupid, but it takes very little to make them laugh; they used to have hysterics at the sight of Paul Daniels's toupee.

I crawled up the stairs to the balcony to see the last scene. I watched on my knees as the cast of nine wonderful actors took their bows. I noted bitterly that the two puppets (for whom I'd written no lines) got the warmest applause. I then adjusted my surgical support belt and geared myself for the verdict of the audience.

You need backbone to work in the theatre.



## The Craft Fayre

'Never, never take me to a craft fair again, even if I beg and scream and implore you, do you promise?'

'I promise,' said my husband, gripping the steering wheel with barely concealed rage as we joined a queue of cars leaving the craft fair car park. At my insistence we had broken a cardinal rule: never leave the house on a bank holiday.

Some long-repressed herding instinct had swept over me the night before and I had pored over the *Leicester Mercury*, looking for local attractions to visit. 'Aha,' I cried eventually, and began to sell the idea of visiting a country house, complete with woodland walks, market garden and craft fair, to my husband. I had been in a peculiar mood all week, beset with doubts and insecurities, dithering at the wardrobe door in the morning, etc. So, no doubt as a way of appeasing the madwoman, my husband agreed to leave the house on a bank holiday. It was a glorious afternoon, we shouted goodbye to the teenage daughter who was skulking in her room, hiding from the sun, and joined the bank holiday traffic. We tooted along happily, listening to *The Archers* on Radio 4.

As we listened to the afternoon play (a modern drama about family life, involving incest, murder and madness), the first signs started to appear on fluorescent cardboard



tied to lampposts: 'Craft Fayre'. Of course we should have turned back there and then, done a Starsky and Hutch three-point turn and headed for home at full speed. To spell fair as fayre is ten out of ten naff. It is as bad as calling a café Ye Olde Tea Shoppe or a cart selling sweets Ye Olde Sweet Kabin.

I saw the latter in a city centre shopping mall last week. To confuse the issue, the boy weighing the pick'n'mix wore an old-fashioned butcher's uniform, complete with striped apron and straw boater. Ludicrous when you think that the sweets are probably made by machinery in a business unit on a windswept industrial estate.

But, patient reader, we did not turn back. Like lemmings, knowing our fate but unable to control it, we rushed towards the edge of the cliff. I shuffled my credit cards impatiently as we approached the grounds of the country house. I counted my cash as we joined a long queue of traffic. I could hardly stop myself from leaping out of the car as we toured the various car parks looking for a space. Eventually, my husband bumped up the car's suspension and drove down a rutted cart track, parked in a ditch, and at last we were able to join the madding bank holiday crowds.

'Tea Rooms', it had said in the newspaper, and I conjured up images of plump apple-cheeked waitresses serving homemade scones warm from the oven. The tea rooms had a long queue, which my husband gallantly joined, leaving me to sit outside in the sunshine. I was perfectly happy for the first half hour. Then I began to be concerned. Had he fallen into a black hole or had he gone

berserk and smashed the tea rooms to smithereens in a frenzy of impatience and hunger? Eventually he emerged carrying a tray, on which lurked two sad scones. At a glance I could tell that these apologies had only recently made the journey from freezer to microwave to cash till. There were no apple-cheeked waitresses, either – just one gawky teenage girl who looked to be in need of orthodontic treatment. With globs of scone sticking to our palates, we entered the craft workshops.

I wasn't aware that sticking nuts and bolts together and making little men sitting astride nut and bolt motorcycles had ever called for a seven-year craft apprenticeship. I was not tempted by the clumsy jewellery made from polished beach pebbles, or by the machine-made quilts in insipid colours. As for the New Age Merlin wall plaques, they looked like solidified cat poo. I almost broke a hundred crystals in my rush to get out of that particular shop. The pottery was heavy and dull and slime green. You wouldn't want it on your table, though it could have been handy for slitting your wrists over as you crawled home, bumper to bumper, in the bank holiday traffic.



## Missing Husband

I have lost thousands of things over the years: umbrellas, gloves, handbags, diaries, jackets, cats, etc. I once left my baby son parked outside the Co-op in his royal family-style pram and strolled home without him. It was his first outing and he slept throughout. So I admit to being somewhat absent-minded, but I'm working on it. I have three notebooks on the go at the moment – the problem is that I've lost two of them. I know that they're in the house somewhere. One of them contains the article that I am trying to re-present here.

Four weeks ago I lost my husband – he was on one Greek island and I was on another. A mad travel agent had sent him to Thessalonika on the mainland, which is the equivalent of a Greek wishing to go to London being sent via the Outer Hebrides. The travel agent's madness did not stop there; he told my husband that the ferry services to Skyros were so frequent that a timetable was not necessary. The 'so frequent' turned out to be one a week on Mondays. My husband found this out on Friday morning. Our arrangement had been that I would meet the first ferry from Thessalonika on Friday morning. On Thursday night, I knew the awful truth, but I still felt compelled to go to Linaria, the little harbour on Skyros, to meet the boat and the phantom husband.



Elias drove me in his Mercedes taxi; he has a degree in English from Athens University. He and I were to become closely bonded over the next two days. He once had Jeffrey Archer in the back of his cab. Apparently, Lord Archer has a penchant for the ceramics of Skyros, and after disembarking from a yacht in the harbour proceeded to plunder the shops. Elias told me that the famous literary lord announced, 'I am Jeffrey Archer,' as he climbed into the cab. Elias replied, 'I do not know you.' I asked him what impression Lord Archer had made on him. 'His wife is very nice,' said Elias diplomatically.

It was not possible to communicate with my husband, but I know him to be a resourceful man, not the type to twiddle his thumbs at Thessalonika harbour until Monday. I knew he would work out a route to Skyros. There were several options: plane, ferry and flying dolphin – a sort of hydrofoil on skis. It became clear that every plane, ferry and flying dolphin would have to be met. Elias pledged his support and he and I drove from one side of the island to the other. The airport consists of a Portakabin, the plane looked like something out of an aeronautical museum, and it carried only nineteen people. As the last white knobby-kneed Englishman appeared on the aeroplane steps, I would shake my head and Elias would rev up the Merc and we would speed towards the harbour.

I became an object of pity; old women in black would enquire after my health and spirits. The taverna owner opposite the ferry docking point would shake his head in sympathy. Meanwhile, ferries and flying dolphins came and went, husbandless. Elias made a joke once – 'Perhaps

he will never come.' I laughed, but it wasn't hearty laughter. Then one morning, after meeting one plane, one ferry and one flying dolphin, Elias said, 'Sue, in five minutes you will see your husband.' And he was right – a flying dolphin drew up and there he was, blowing kisses through the cabin window. Elias withdrew ten yards and watched as my husband and I were reunited on the quay. If it had been a film, the old woman in black, the taverna owner and the fishermen would have cheered and carried my husband shoulder-high to the taverna – but this was real life, so they didn't. But I think they were quietly pleased.

During the week we spent on Skyros, my husband was approached many times by people sympathizing with his travel difficulties. 'I quite enjoyed it,' he would reply. 'It was an adventure.' Which made me wonder about Elias' other joke – the one about the beautiful young Greek girl at Thessalonika.



## Mary the Doll

I've got a doll called Mary. She sits on a bookshelf in my workroom (where I do no work), wearing a knitted vest and knicker outfit and a hideous purple crocheted dress. She is made of pot (or bisque if you want to be posh) and her limbs and head are fastened to her torso by elastic bands. Her face is prettily painted, and the reason she sits high up on the bookshelf is that I like her very much and I am determined to keep her from harm.

My grandchildren are only allowed to hold her under strict adult supervision (mine). No religious ceremony can be as sombre as the moment I lift Mary from the shelf and place her into a grandchild's arms. The rules are that the child has to remain sitting and the doll has to remain dressed. As soon as my grandchildren could speak, I told them that Mary had been my doll when I was a little girl, and I banged on about how carefully I had looked after my fragile doll. I probably had a horrible self-congratulatory smirk on my face as I did so.

A month ago I was placing the *Observer* business supplement on the floor against my flooding dishwasher, when I had a sudden memory flashback and saw myself walking into a junk shop in the inner city and buying Mary. I would have been thirty-five at the time. I went weak at the knees, which was quite convenient because I was soon



on my knees trying to stem the sudsy flood from the dishwasher. How could I have imagined and then recounted the story that I had known Mary for forty-eight years? As I paddled around the kitchen (incidentally, does anybody know a decent dishwasher mechanic in the Leicester area?), as I mopped and squeezed, I wondered what else I'd imagined. Was I truly the only child to fail the cycling proficiency test in my class at junior school? Was it really me who brought shame to the school open day by getting the ribbons tangled during the maypole dance? Perhaps it wasn't me who shouted 'Mackeson!' as the swan fluttered to her death during a school trip to see *Swan Lake* (Mackeson was being advertised for its reviving qualities at the time). Had I only imagined myself to be this clumsy, irrelevant child? I put my brain into computer mode and tried to filter out more false memories.

I confessed to the first child who came to the house. 'Don't worry about it, Mum,' he said, with that tolerant smile people use when they talk to the simple-minded. 'The youngest daughter was less tolerant: 'You do it all the time,' she said, rolling her eyes about. The eldest daughter dropped another bombshell: 'You didn't buy Mary from a junk shop,' she said. 'You found her in a skip.'

I reeled about a bit, clutched my head, etc. How could I have deceived myself twice? I prayed that I wouldn't be called as a witness in a trial. I, who could no longer tell fact from fiction.

But I'm in good company. There was the famous case of the Los Angeles Police Conference . . . or it could have been the New York Police, or was it San Francisco? Any-

way, they had convened to talk about the reliability of witness evidence. An eminent doctor or psychologist or senior police person was halfway through a lecture when somebody wearing a gorilla outfit ran from the back of the hall up to the podium, pointed a banana (I think) at the lecturer, shouted 'Bang! Bang! Bang!' and ran out again. The lecturer ordered the police people in the hall immediately to write down what they'd seen, and out of 300 or 400 or 500 police people in the hall, not one of them got it right. (One person wrote that the gorilla was wearing a white tuxedo and was carrying a bunch of flowers.) It does make you question historical 'facts'. Was it cakes King Alfred burnt, or did he set his shoes alight whilst drying them next to the fire?

For years I've congratulated myself on my superior powers of observation, yacked on about the importance of 'truth' to anybody who would listen. But Mary has changed all that. Last night I allowed Doogie, my three-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter, to walk across my workroom with Mary in her arms.

PS. The dishwasher mechanic doesn't have to be 'decent'. I don't care what his or her morals are. I just want my dishwasher mended.



## Book Early to Avoid Disappointment

Do you know how to have a bargain holiday, filled with mystery and the unexpected? I do. You rush into a travel agent's office on the Wednesday and you gabble that you want to be on a beach in Majorca on the Friday. The travel agent turns to her computer (usually with a sigh) and presses a few knobs. An hour later you leave the shop. You had stressed that you wanted to fly from East Midlands airport on the Friday, but you find yourself agreeing to fly from Gatwick on a late flight that will deposit you at Palma airport at five minutes past five on the Saturday morning. You know that at that time all the babies on the plane will be wailing piteously, and that every child under five years old will be having mega tantrums by the luggage carousel (together with most of the adult men who will be brandishing their luggage trolleys like jousting knights of old).

We last-minute, bargain-holiday buyers are punished for our insouciance. We are not told where we are going to stay until just before we get on the coach. Along with our fellow travellers, we cluster around our holiday firm's representative, who is usually called Julie. The snaggle-toothed couple from Wolverhampton at the front are given a hotel voucher. 'The Splendide,' says Julie, and you know by her awed tone of voice that the Hotel Splendide



is where the King of Spain stays when his villa is being redecorated. The next voucher is given to the large family of Eastenders who had surrounded you on the plane. Julie says, 'The Bon Vista Apartments, on the beach.' The voucher is handed over with a smile and received with smiles.

Then it is your turn. Julie cannot quite look you in the eye. 'Ah,' she says, on hearing your name. She mumbles something. It sounds like the Hellhole Hotel. You ask her to repeat it. It is the Hellhole Hotel. It is there written in Julie's childlike script, on the voucher. As you get on the coach you laugh with your partner and say brave things like 'Hellhole must mean something else in Spanish, or perhaps it has been misspelt. Hela Hola, for instance.'

The coach speeds through the Majorcan countryside while Julie runs through her spiel on a malfunctioning hand-held microphone. The 'scenery', as Julie calls it, is becoming visible in the grey dawn light. Julie suggests an outing. She tells us to go to Palma harbour and to pose beside a multi-millionaire's yacht and get somebody to take our photograph, then on our return home pretend the yacht was ours! She then suggests we visit Dias during our stay because Michael Douglas has a house there and we might 'rub shoulders with him in the grocery shop'. Eventually, the snaggle-tooths are dropped off at the truly splendid 'Splendide'. The Eastenders are deposited at the beachside apartments. By now the sun is up and the sea can be seen, brochure blue.

The coach is empty apart from you and your partner, Julie and the driver. The coach turns down a track and

bumps along the potholes until it comes to a halt outside a building with so much peeling white stucco it looks like an incompetently iced wedding cake. A mangy dog is lying on the steps doing something disgusting with its tongue. But later, as you inspect your room and en-suite bathroom, you realize the dog was at least making an effort to clean itself. Which is something the hotel has failed to do to your room. You open the warped shutters and go out on to the balcony. The sea is nowhere to be seen.

You should book well ahead, I can hear you say. My sister booked a holiday in February for nine people, only to be told in July, at Dover (one hour before the ferry sailed), that she couldn't have the holiday she had booked and paid for because her hotel had been double-booked. After much trailing around various resorts, the nine ended up crammed into two rooms (my sister slept on the balcony). We are sure the company concerned will do the decent thing and compensate the nine people who had saved up all year and then been denied their holiday, and we are convinced the delay so far has been caused by an administrative error. There can surely be no other explanation. Can there?



## Gimme Food and Newspapers

Another deadline, another rewrite, another hotel room. Blackpool this time. My room faces the sea and I sit and watch the tide come in and go out. There is an A4 pad on my knees and an inky pen in my hand, but not a single creative thought in my head.

I am rewriting a film, or rather I am failing to rewrite a film. I've lost count of the drafts I've written over the past four years. I think it's eight, but it could be nine. I think constantly about *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and screenwriter Richard Curtis. Mr Curtis wrote seventeen drafts, but this knowledge fails to comfort me.

I wish there was a big meaty part in my film for the star of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, Hugh Grant, but there isn't. My male lead is a forty-five-year-old tortoise-fancier who is disgusted by sex and cuts his own hair – hardly Mr Grant's style.

I get up and pace around my room. I'm feeling slightly claustrophobic because I've only just vacated the suite down the corridor. Two friends came for the weekend and the suite worked out cheaper than booking three rooms.

'This is where Mrs Thatcher and John Major stay when they visit Blackpool,' said the charming Mr Price as he opened the door of the Westminster Suite. I had a sudden vision of Mrs Thatcher and John Major strolling along



the Golden Mile, arm in arm, wearing Mr Blobby baseball caps. Had I fallen upon a scandal that would bring down the government? Unfortunately not. Apparently, it was strictly Margaret 'n' Denis and John 'n' Norma.

So, after the spacious glories of the suite in which there were four rooms to pace (five including the shower), I am reduced to the confined pacing of a tiger in a politically incorrect zoo.

Unless breakfast is included, I never eat in English hotels. I will eat at transport cafés, at caravans in lay-bys, but never in hotels. I suspect that the ingredients that go into hotel kitchens are marked 'Unfit for human consumption. Hotel use only'.

Whilst in Blackpool, I ate in Harry Ramsden's fish and chip emporium four times. I hate queuing, but the thought of that succulent fresh haddock inside that light crispy batter had me standing in line. (By the way, Harry, please do something about those two sets of doors. Trying to get a wheelchair through them is like trying to get Lady Olga Maitland a place in heaven.)

The fourth time I was accompanied by my parents and my sister, who had come to give me a lift back to Leices-ter. 'Didn't tek you long,' said our young waiter, looking down admiringly at our clean plates. We don't mess about with food in our family. We could speed-eat for England. Is it in the genes, or is it a primeval fear that our food is going to be snatched away from us?

Incidentally, has anyone ever finished a 'Harry's Challenge'? I saw a few foolhardy blokes order it from the menu, only to see their jaws drop when it was put before

them. A 'Harry's Challenge' consists of a piece of haddock the size of a small child, surrounded by a pile of chips the height of a minor Welsh mountain. A lake of mushy peas sets it off nicely. Nobody I saw rose to the challenge.

Back at the hotel, I gloom out of the window at the sea, count the seagulls, watch the horizon for ships, paint my toenails cyclamen pink, and think until my head hurts. I allow myself no distractions; there are no books in my room, no magazines, and I don't turn the television on. However, the hotel pushes a complimentary copy of the *Daily Telegraph* under my door every morning. I must admit that my lip curled the first time I saw it lying there. We all have our prejudices, and one of mine was that the *Daily Telegraph* was read only by crusty old colonels with politics to the right of Genghis Khan. It's no secret that my politics are to the left of Lenin and Livingstone, so it came as a shock to find that I was actually enjoying the *Daily Telegraph*. It made me laugh, it was well written and it was critical of the present government.

I still have the *Guardian* delivered, but I now sneak out and buy the *Daily Telegraph for pleasure*. What next? Will I start foxhunting, wearing pussy-bow blouses or calling for capital punishment in schools? Watch this space.



## Mugging

An elderly lady, Mrs Coleman, was mugged outside our house last week. She is seventy-five and was on her way to the hairdresser's. It was a beautiful day, the sort of day when you feel glad to be alive. Her husband was not feeling well, so she insisted that he stay at home instead of driving her to have her hair done, as he usually did.

My eldest daughter heard her shouting for help, looked out of the window and saw Mrs Coleman being helped to her feet by a female motorist and a neighbour from down the road. Together they brought Mrs Coleman into our house. She was covered in blood, her stockings were torn and she was holding the broken straps of her handbag in one hand. She was in extreme shock and was trembling uncontrollably. When she saw her reflection in the hall mirror she started to cry.

The police and an ambulance were sent for. A police motorcyclist came within minutes, others followed. Mrs Coleman managed to give a policeman who turned up in a patrol car a description of the assailant: white, young, on a bike, dark hair. The motorcyclist was despatched to try to find this cruel young man. The ambulancemen arrived and were kind and attentive to Mrs Coleman.

'We must tell your husband,' they said. Mrs Coleman became distressed. 'No,' she said, 'he's not well, he mustn't



have a shock.' At this point my daughter had to leave the room, she was so upset and angry. Outside she found the police motorcyclist kicking at our garden wall in his frustration. The young man had vanished, and there were no eye-witnesses to the attack.

Mrs Coleman was carried, on a stretcher, from the house and taken to hospital. A policeman left to break the shocking news to Mr Coleman, and three of my children were left to talk about what they would like to do to the cowardly young man who had attacked a frail seventy-five-year-old woman.

We later found out that Mrs Coleman had a regular appointment at the hospital. She was undergoing a daily course of chemotherapy there. I felt a murderous rage when I arrived home and heard this sad story. I knew that Mrs Coleman's life would never be the same. I hoped it wouldn't stop her from walking down a pleasant tree-lined street on a lovely day in the middle of the afternoon again. But I guessed that it would probably diminish her life in many such small ways.

It is easy to despair of human nature at times like these. The temptation is to lock ourselves away from the world, to trust nobody and never venture out after dark. But if we do this the criminals have won. They will not only have taken away our money and our belongings, they will have snatched away our confidence and our freedom. It is important to remember that the dark-haired young man on the bicycle is in a tiny minority. Other criminals despise his type of cowardly crime, and, when he is eventually caught and sent to prison, his life will be made extremely

uncomfortable. In the prison hierarchy he will be the lowest of the low, on a par with those convicted of crimes involving cruelty to children.

The overwhelming majority of people are law abiding and respectful of the need to protect and care for the very young and the very old. Most of us keep these moral laws automatically, which is why we are so outraged when one of our fellow human beings dares to break this moral code.

As I have said earlier, I wasn't at home at the time of Mrs Coleman's attack. I was in London attending the rehearsals of *The Queen and I*, which was due to open in the West End. So I was startled to read in the local paper that it was I who found Mrs Coleman in the street and brought her into the house.

For a moment I thought that I had finally lost all my marbles – that I had hallucinated the train journey to London, the rehearsals and the train journey back. I didn't understand how anybody could confuse my daughter with me: she is young and beautiful, and I am lateish middle-aged and, well, not beautiful.

Mrs Coleman gave a very spirited account of her attack to the local paper; she was speaking from her son's home where she was recovering from her injuries. I detected from what she said that she was a brave woman who was most indignant that a cruel stranger had entered her life and turned it upside down. And, now that I think about it, there may be a chance that she will walk down our road again in the afternoon. If she does, I hope she calls in for a cup of tea. I'd like to meet her, for real this time.



## Prince Charles for King?

I've had this theory for some time. I've kept it to myself so far because I fear public ridicule. I feel like the person who, many hundreds of years ago, first ventured the opinion, 'Er, do you think it might be possible that er... the earth is... er, actually *round* instead of er... *flat*?' So bear with me, will you?

My theory is this: I think Prince Charles would be relieved if the institution of the monarchy was to be brought to an end. I have no evidence to put before you; I am certainly not on intimate terms with Prince Charles. In fact I am not on any terms with him. Nor am I likely to be. But I have this feeling.

On the face of it the job of king looks quite attractive. The money is extremely good, the holidays are long, you get to see the world, you don't have to worry about missing your plane because of roadworks on the M25 – your plane waits for you. Come to think of it, if you are king, what are you doing on the M25? Why aren't you in your own helicopter, flying above the traffic-bound masses?

When a king reaches his destination he doesn't have to lug his baggage under a scorching sun towards a taxi driver who is picking his nose and wiping his finger on the upholstery. No, a king is led by flunkies towards an air-conditioned limousine that proceeds to drive along streets



closed to normal traffic due to 'security'. There may be a little light waving to be done to the gaggles of flag-brandishing schoolchildren fainting of sunstroke on the pavement, but there is no danger of straining the royal wrist: for just as children from ordinary backgrounds are trained by their parents to open the top of a cornflakes packet without mangling the whole box, or to empty a pedal-bin without scattering eggshells underfoot en route to the dustbin, so are royal children trained, almost from birth, to perfect their wave to the crowd.

Other advantages of being king are . . . meeting world-famous figures; having twenty-four hour room service (every day); and having a book written about you with a cover photograph that depicts you as being a deeply serious, anguished individual. Already bowed down with their future responsibilities, kings are able to leave home knowing that somebody will feed the pets and that the video won't be stolen. They don't lie awake at night worrying about class, agonizing, 'Am I upper-lower-middle?' or 'Am I lower-working scum?' Kings can confidently assert, 'I am upper, upper, upper' and know that no British person will contradict them.

When we wore lizardskin shoes and lived in caves, I suppose it made sense to have a king, somebody who bossed us about and made sure the fire was kept going.

In medieval times we were told that the king had been ordained by God and that a touch of his royal digit would cure us of our disgusting, scrofulous diseases. We also believed that the earth was flat and that mangel-wurzels were delicious. In other words, we were ignorant peasants

who lived in hovels and did not have the advantage of public libraries. It's hard to be king in the late twentieth century. The public is so much more sophisticated. Babies are now born knowing how to programme the video to record *Rosie and Jim*.

Let us now look at the disadvantages of being king:

*Travel* You are met off the plane by a collection of late-middle-aged men in new suits, who sweat with nervous tension as they are introduced to you. Their handshakes feel like decomposing fish. They are nervous *because you are the king*.

*Meeting the famous* Most famous people are boring. They only want to talk about themselves and constantly interrupt when you want to talk about yourself. The only reason they agree to meet you is *because you are the king*.

*Your biography* Because your biographer comes from that ancient dynastic family the Dimblebys, you feel obliged to tell him all your innermost thoughts on the deprivations of your miserable childhood. You forget that your mother and father can read and that a good thrashing, a cold bedroom and poor food constituted the childhood of most British people born in the Forties. So you fail to get any sympathy and in your heart you know that the book has been commissioned, written and published *because they think you will be king*.

One day you say to yourself, 'I have not been ordained by God. I am human and I want to be *free*.'

Like I said, it's only a theory.



## The Coat

There is a Chinese proverb. 'Beware of occasions that demand new clothes.' I consistently ignore this advice. On the occasion of my first American book promotion – a landmark in any writer's life – I not only ignored the advice, I laughed in its face.

I was walking down a street in London when I saw The Coat in a shop window. It was ankle length, suede and lined in sheepskin. I saw myself wearing it, in New York, in a snow storm. In my fantasy I was swapping witticisms with sophisticated New York publishers while we were entering a smart restaurant to celebrate the huge success of my book.

I went into the shop and touched The Coat. The suede was as soft as a lover's skin. A smiling girl murmured encouraging words and I soon found myself wearing The Coat and poncing up and down in front of what seemed like a particularly flattering mirror. The coat weighed nothing. I could have been wearing thistledown. The girl adjusted the collar so that it framed my face. I saw myself on the top of the Empire State Building, as snug as a bug despite the biting east wind blowing from the Hudson River.

Perhaps at this point I should inform you that the itinerary for my American tour was as follows: Heathrow – New York – Boston – New York – Washington – Miami – Heathrow.



Did you spot the odd one out? Miami boasts temperatures in the high nineties for most of the year, except for a couple of months when it drops to the high seventies. But, as I stood in the shop clad from ears to ankles in the dream coat, I banished Miami from what was left of my mind. The salesgirl (who had probably just graduated from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) said, 'I've been longing for somebody elegant and sophisticated to buy that coat.' Now, reader, in normal circumstances I would have laughed, because I know I am not elegant. My chipped nail varnish is legendary, my tights spring holes as soon as I take them out of the packet, and my black tailored suits are usually decorated with an inelegant sprinkling of white cat hairs. But the circumstances were not normal. I was going to four American cities where I would be giving readings from my book. I was terrified. So I chose to believe the salesgirl. She was obviously a great judge of character, I decided, and anyway I needed 'The Coat'. It would protect me from hostile elements: the public and the weather.

I bought it. The price of 'The Coat' is a secret I will take to my grave. My daughters, who take an almost obsessive interest in the price I pay for my clothes, put me through their usual KGB interrogation routine, but I did not crack.

The Coat was too long for any wardrobe in the house and it dragged on the floor of the cloakroom, so I hung it on a hanger from the picture rail in the hall. Visitors and family took to stroking it as though it were an exotic pet. The weather in England was unseasonably warm so I had

yet to wear 'The Coat', but New York and that snow storm were never far from my mind.

There was a minor disaster when the dry cleaners decided to close early – trapping the jacket/trousers/skirt outfit I had planned to take as my 'core wardrobe'. I considered throwing a brick through the window, grabbing my clothes and leaving fifteen quid on the counter, but I was counselled against it by other, more sensible members of my family.

The Coat, though light, is extremely bulky. I wore it in duty free, but kept knocking things off the shelves. The Coat demanded a new sense of spatial awareness; it was made for the great outdoors. I had forgotten that I had come to positively dislike the outdoors and spend most of my time in darkened, overheated interiors. Sweating and gasping, I shrugged 'The Coat' off and got on the plane. The Coat refused to go into the overhead locker. Just as I was about to slam the door on the damn thing, it would insinuate itself out. I trapped it eventually, but only just.

New York was rejoicing in a freak heatwave. The taxi driver who drove me to my hotel wore a T-shirt. People strolled along the sidewalks in Bermuda shorts.

In Miami I sat on the beach in my Wonderbra and knickers, leaving 'The Coat' to sulk in the hotel wardrobe (by that time we weren't speaking).

I'm back in England now and still praying for a cold snap, but I'm beginning to think that 'The Coat' is a useless acquisition, except as a mocking testament to my vanity and folly.



## Burglaries

We've been burgled four times in four months. We may as well leave the doors and windows wide open and erect a pink neon sign in the front garden that flashes *House empty. Burglars welcome*. Not that the house needs to be empty for burglars to call on us. The last time they came, my daughter was ill in bed, I was upstairs on the phone, the TV was on in the sitting room and there were three radios playing – all talk stations – but this cacophony of noise still didn't deter them.

Hearing a squeal of tyres, my daughter got out of her sickbed and looked out of her bedroom window to see a battered yellow car being reversed at speed and parked opposite our house. Two ferret-faced boys got out, crossed the road and began to ring our doorbell with some ferocity – rather like the Gestapo used to carry on in old war films. 'I'll have to go,' I said to my sister, 'it sounds like there's a maniac at the door.' My daughter came into my room and told me that she didn't like the look of the two youths. In itself this statement was not unusual – she is notoriously picky when it comes to men. The ringing continued, the letter-box was clattered, the door was booted.

This poor door has been sledgehammered open in previous burglaries and is now permanently out of action. In



fact it is no longer a door, it is merely a piece of wood that keeps out the elements, stray dogs, etc. Other people's front doors open; ours does not. Large nails and heavy bolts have been driven into it. The noise stopped and we looked out of the window to see the ferret faces strolling towards the back of the house. I phoned 999 and asked the operator for the police. It could only have been seconds, but it felt like a fortnight before the police answered and I was able to give our address and the fact that two potential burglars were 'climbing over our back garden wall' – because by now we were in the bathroom watching them do just this.

My daughter hurriedly changed out of her teddy-bear pyjamas (not the thing to be wearing when burglars call) into a more assertive, less vulnerable outfit, and went to the window to take the number of the ferret faces' conspicuous yellow car. By now a boy was chiselling away at the French windows at the back of the house. A police patrol car was 'on its way', said the policewoman on the other end of the phone. I handed the phone to my daughter and looked around the upstairs landing for a blunt instrument. Something to give us a few moments should the boys be armed with a knife. But it was a pathetic choice of potential weapons. A bottle of bubble bath? A wooden coat hanger? A loafah on a stick?

Simultaneously I heard the French doors crack open and my daughter whisper, 'Mum, they've put me on hold!' She then shouted down the phone, 'The burglars are in my house!' Adrenaline took over. I was filled with rage – an emotion that doesn't visit me often. I was a lioness defending her cub. There was no way I was going to let

the ferret faces upstairs to frighten my daughter, and I was also not going to cower upstairs while they plundered the few possessions we had left from the previous burglaries. I told my daughter to lock herself in her bedroom and crept downstairs.

Ferret face One was in the last room I searched. To say he was gobsmailed when he saw me would be an understatement. His ferrety jaw dropped open at the sight of me, the harridan whose chosen weapon was a book – *Tolstoy* by A. N. Wilson. I didn't need to bludgeon the boy with biography, however – he turned and ran out of the house, slipped in a pile of slimy leaves I had sluttishly left on the garden path, recovered himself and leapt over the wall. Ferret face Two had already preceded him. I shouted, in a voice I didn't know I had, well, perhaps I won't tell you what I shouted, this being a family magazine, but a lot of words in the sentence began with letters to be found in the early part of the alphabet.

I ran round to the front of the house to see the boys trying desperately to start their car. Eventually, in a cloud of exhaust fumes, they managed it and sped up the road with me futilely following on foot. As they turned at the top of the road, a police patrol car passed them. Within forty-five seconds there were three police vehicles outside our house; within another minute there were nine. As I said regretfully to the charming policeman who took down the ferret faces' description, 'I should have waited one more minute.' I've said it to myself many times since then.

Their number plates were false, their fingerprints were blurred. They haven't been caught.



## Beige in Cromer

I'm in another hotel, trying to write another film script. The film is set in Barcelona, so where did I choose to go when the producer of the film offered to pay my expenses? Cromer, that's where. Not Cromer USA, or Cromer just outside Barcelona, but Cromer Norfolk. It must be something to do with turning fifty next year because, it has to be said, the visitors to Cromer are not young and hip. I was gloomily looking into a draper's shop window this morning and saw a notice, *Latest Fashion*, £7.99, pinned on to the hem of a hideous sludge-green polyester pleated skirt that was covered in a maple leaf print. I laughed out loud (I've only been here a day and a half but I've already attracted a few curious glances). I may not look as though I'm at the cutting edge of fashion, but I know my *Vogue* and I can't recall seeing a breathily written article urging us readers into polyester pleats.

I left a packet of cigarettes on a shop counter later on and as I was leaving the shop I heard the girl on the till say, 'Whose are these?' A woman customer said, 'They're the woman in black's.' After I'd thanked them both and blamed my poor memory on the menopause and generally made a fool of myself, I walked along the sea front repeating to myself the romantic phrase, The Woman in Black. On the way I passed people only ten years older



than me who seemed to be wearing a type of informal uniform: a beige car coat and checked pleated skirt for the women and beige car coat and beige trousers for the men. Both sexes seemed to be wearing the same beige crêpe-soled shoes. The thing I want to know is, will it happen to me? On my sixtieth birthday will I also develop this passion for beige? And what about the permed hair that so many beige-clad older women go in for? Is it compulsory? Does a notice arrive with the pension book?

You are hereby ordered to attend Madame Yvonne's Salon at 1300 hours, where you will be given the regulation perm. Please note that the beige uniform must be worn.

If I was the Great Dictator of the World I would ban beige – it is the colour of compromise and timidity, but I have to admit fear: when we're sixty will my black-clad generation be despised by the generation below us? Will they sneer at our black leather jackets? Will black be the new beige?

There is only one tramp in Cromer. Under the dirt, he is young and handsome. Like most tramps, he is burdened down with bags of rubbish and mysterious bundles. He is quiet and wears black clothes. He has no obvious signs of mental illness. I tried to imagine what brought him to this present state. Was he a writer who came to Cromer to write a film, failed, and is fated to roam the sea front for ever more? Will I be joining him in two weeks?

When I was a child the countryside swarmed with tramps. You could hardly walk down a country lane with-

out bumping into one and, on the whole, they were treated courteously by most people. They were given cups of tea and sandwiches at certain houses on their route, and their advice was sought on the weather and the countryside. I certainly envied them their freedom to roam about and please themselves, especially if I met one dozing by the roadside as I was dragging myself to school.

Cromer is a small place and it seems that every time I turn a corner I come face to face with the handsome tramp. A few hours ago we even shared a bench. We sat together in silence staring at the sunshine on the sea. I am determined not to get to know him. The only relationship I want in Cromer is with my film. I wish my loved one was here, though. I am occupying the honeymoon suite at the Pentonville Hotel complete with Jacuzzi, brass bed and panoramic sea views.

The sun has gone now and there's a cold wind coming off the sea. I could do with a warm beige car coat.



## *Pulp Fiction*

I've resisted as long as I can, but I've finally cracked. I've got to write about *Pulp Fiction*. I shan't bang on in detail about it (suffice it to say that it is the best film I have ever seen), but I want to try to convey to you the extraordinary effect that the film has had on the people I know. They can't stop talking about it. They quote chunks of the dialogue. They repeat the jokes. They get up and illustrate the dance steps. They discuss their favourite scenes and listen with careful attention while other people discuss theirs, and God knows how many hours have gone by and dead-lines missed while I've stuck my own oar in.

The film is about people who make a living from violence; they are contract killers, boxers, soldiers and armed robbers. These people buy and use hard drugs as casually as you or I might buy or use teabags. Their language is frequently obscene. It is not a film for the kiddiewinkies or your mother (although I've just realized I spent most of last Saturday at a lovely family wedding urging my mother to go and see it).

There was a time earlier this year when my eldest son was the only member of our branch of the family not to have seen *Pulp Fiction*. He cut a sad, isolated figure, unable to join in PF conversations and remaining straight-faced when the rest of us were cackling at a PF joke. Eventually,



although he's now a man of thirty (and starting to notice how ludicrously young doctors are these days), I ordered him to go to the cinema, just like I used to order him to wear a vest when he was a little boy and the weather changed.

It was the making of him. The next day we gathered him back into the bosom of the family and listened joyfully as he brought his own particular intelligence to analysing the film. *Pulp Fiction* has at last given the English an alternative to talking about the weather as a conversational icebreaker. In fact, it often becomes the conversation.

I've been to meetings to discuss my own screenplays and spent most of the time discussing the genius of *Pulp Fiction*'s writer/director, Quentin Tarantino (who is also a mere child). So instead of convincing the producers of my own abilities, I've put myself in the shade. So deep in the shade that nothing is likely to grow. I must stop doing it – it's professional suicide.

I do have an obsessional personality. I wasn't content to simply love Elvis – I wrote to him and asked him to marry me when I reached the legal age of sixteen. (And I also suffer from self-delusion. I expected him to reply and say he was thinking about it.) My next serious obsession was with the writer Dostoevsky. At one time I was never without one of his books on my teenage person. Had he been alive at the height of my passion, I would have trekked to Leningrad and stood in the snow and begged him for a clipping from his beard.

John Travolta stars in *Pulp Fiction* and my daughters have fallen for him all over again. This is a bit worrying

because he plays a lank-haired, pasty-faced, overweight piece of lowlife. He would be the son-in-law from hell.

For those of you who haven't seen *Pulp Fiction*, I urge you to see it; despite its violent subject matter, it is a highly moral film. The dialogue is witty and clever and you care passionately about the characters as they progress through the story. I've seen it three times. I've bought the published screenplay, a cassette of the music and the video. If John Travolta dolls went on sale tomorrow, I'd buy one. What am I talking about? I'd buy three.

A sad consequence of my current obsession is the cooling relationship between me and the few people I know who dislike the film. The theatre critic Ken Tynan wrote: 'I couldn't love anybody who doesn't love *Look Back in Anger*.' Other people have said the same of the film *Casablanca*, which is now every film critic's choice.

If only I could develop an obsessive passion for ironing or early rising or completing deadlines. How much easier my life, and the life of the editor of Sainsbury's *The Magazine*, would be. Go and see it, please.



## I Have to Have Liver

I'm not a well woman. I've got bronchitis. I took to my bed for a few days (oh, all right, four glorious days of sleep, meals on trays, antibiotics, listening to the radio, watching the clouds and doing nothing). The coughing was a damned nuisance to me and everybody else in the house, and at times I felt very poorly and was damp-eyed with horrible self-pity. But I have to admit that I enjoyed myself enormously.

My husband cooked me the type of meal that used to be served up to Edwardian invalids: huge quantities of comfort food, gravy and custard. He even lined the tray with a clean tea towel. I ate every last crumb. I was like a wolf woman. In fact, one day at 3 a.m. I woke in a bronchitic sweat to find my husband in an exhausted sleep beside me (it's not easy cooking for Wolf Woman), and I had to have liver – nothing else would do.

I staggered downstairs and rummaged through the never-to-be-eaten food at the bottom of the freezer. Eventually I found it – a packet of lambs' liver. It was encrusted in icicles, and must have been there since Mario Lanza topped the hit parade. I averted my eyes from the use-by date and slung the icy bag into the microwave. While it spat and melted I hacked at an onion and some potatoes. It was the SAS Brutalist School of Cookery.



When the liver was reasonably defrosted, I threw it into a roasting tin and chucked it in the oven. Then I paced up and down and waited for it to cook. Half an hour later, I wiped my wolf chops of liver and onions and mashed potato and went back to bed. My husband was baffled by the evidence of my early morning saturnalia. 'Why liver?' he asked. 'It needed using up,' I said feebly, between coughs.

An illness of some kind had been predicted for me by friends and family ever since I announced that I was going to Australia for seven days and would be visiting three cities: Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide. Max Stafford-Clark, the theatre director, and I had business out there, setting up an Australian tour of *The Queen and I*. Because of my addiction, I couldn't face twenty-three hours without a fag, so I petitioned to fly with Malaysia Airlines, which still allows a few social deviants to sit at the back of the plane and puff on the deadly weed.

Max sat in the middle of the plane, guarding his clean lungs, but we met up in Kuala Lumpur at Dunkin' Donuts, where we tried to decide whether the fiery red ball in the sky was the sun going down or the sun coming up. Incidentally, the duty-free shopping mall at Kuala Lumpur stretches as far as the eye can see, but after walking its length and breadth with a fistful of credit cards, I emerged with nothing – not a thing. I should have taken this as a symptom of serious illness and demanded to see a doctor. Shopping isn't really my middle name – it's Lilian – but it's an activity I'm very fond of, though just lately the only things I seem to buy are nailbrushes and cushions.

Australia was wonderful – too wonderful as it turned out. Max and I were looking for a suitably squalid location in which to exile the Queen (my fictional Queen). Most normal people want to see the sights, areas of outstanding beauty, etc. Not us. 'We want to see a poor, run-down area,' said Max to the cab driver in Melbourne. God knows the man did his best, but after driving through what looked to us like endless affluent suburbs, he knew he'd failed us. It was the same story in Sydney and Adelaide.

Of course, there was comparative poverty, but nothing like Britain's grey, cold council estates. However, I did discover a new scene for the Australian version of the play in a pub in Sydney. We saw a list of coming attractions. 'Barmaid's Jelly Wrestling: Monday Night. Five Dollars.' Then, in brackets, 'First Two Rows Free.' A jelly-wrestling scene involving a younger member of the royal family would give the play a gritty Australian authenticity, we decided, and jelly was so redolent of aristocratic nursery teas. I can hear nanny now: 'Diana, eat your bread and butter first and then you can wrestle in your jelly.'

I've just realized that it's at least two hours since I had a good cough. This is a serious blow. It means I'm getting better. I may have to cook tonight.



## Nudity

I used to be quite a sporty girl. At one time I was ne happier than when I was hurdling or long-jumping bashing at a shuttlecock. Naturally, this all took place school. The only strenuous exercise I've taken since I South Wigston High School for Girls, at the age of teen, has taken place in the labour ward of a maternity hospital: I've pushed hard for England four times.

But however much I enjoyed games lessons, they were always haunted by the dreaded spectre of the compulsory showers at the end. Thirty girls would be crowded into echoing, white, tiled room and ordered to strip. We would then be lined up and ordered to walk through the shower room, where alternating jets of hot and cold water sea down on our poor self-conscious English bodies. The only girl in our class who seemed to enjoy compulsory showers, indeed flaunted herself in them, had a very exotic foreign name. I won't reveal it here because she knows things about me (youthful misdemeanours, quite trivial back-of-the-bike sheds stuff, but even so). Quite often I would try to rush through the shower wearing Aertex top and gym knickers, hoping that the other girls and the steam would hide me; sometimes I got away with it, but mostly I was caught by Mrs Scruton, the game mistress, and ordered to go through again, naked.



I was ludicrously modest in those days. Art galleries were fraught with potential embarrassment, and even the bare-breasted statues in the Town Hall square caused me to blush and look down at my sensible school shoes. I sometimes forged notes:

*Dear Mrs Scruton,*

*Susan has been up all night with her stomach. Please do not let her take a shower as this could make her worse.*

*Yours sincerely, etc.*

Mrs Scruton could spot a forged note at 250 paces. She would raise a bushy eyebrow and wordlessly hand back the note, then stand by my peg as I squirmed out of my clothes. When communal changing rooms in shops came in, I stopped buying clothes. Wearing a swimsuit on the beach was an act of great courage – even then I wouldn't really move about, I'd sit rigidly on my towel behind a newspaper. If my children needed help with their sandcastles, I'd shout advice at them, like a football manager, from the sidelines.

The few people to see me naked did so in Stygian darkness. When miniskirts came in, I turned the hems of my existing skirts up by a daring two inches. (I think this is probably the last time I held a needle in my hand.) All this, dear reader, because I thought I was fat. Convinced that I was a blubbery tub of lard whose wobbling flesh must be kept from public gaze.

I was looking at old photographs recently and realized

that, apart from a year when I inexplicably blew up to twelve stone, I have never been fat. The fat git I saw scowling back from the mirror was not me. I was filled with regret. All those years hiding in maxi-skirts and big jumpers when I could have been running about in bikinis, playing volleyball on the beach. Well, perhaps not volleyball, but I could at least have stuck a flag in the odd sandcastle.

I am now in my fiftieth year and feel compelled to make the most of every opportunity, so when I went to Skyros to teach writing I didn't spend my time skulking on the nearest beach in a one-piece bathing suit. I put my shoulders back, stiffened my resolve (I teach my writers never to use clichés) and trekked to 'Bare-Arsed Beach' where I took all my clothes off, in public, in daylight, in front of people I knew. It was a wonderfully liberating experience. People did not run from the beach covering their eyes screaming, 'For God's sake, cover yourself woman.' No thunderbolt came from the sky. Me and my fellow nudists lay and talked about gardening, builders, the nature of existence and the price of teabags. Then, wearing only a baseball cap and a pair of watersports sandals, I paddled a surfboard along the water's edge. Mrs Scruton would have been proud of me.



## Heatwave

*Tuesday* My husband has just come back from the all-night garage with bags full of lemonade and other nice things to add to vodka. Leicester's medical officer has warned we citizens of the town that we must drink at least three litres of liquid a day (daytime temperatures hit 92°F). We are following his advice assiduously.

Nobody is that keen to cook. The Aga is like a fiery monster in the kitchen, but we can't switch it off. Two and a half years ago, in deep winter, we smugly decided to be Aga purists – no running to supplementary gas rings for us, we declared. We now live with the results of our puritanism.

We have been burgled again recently – five times in six months, so the house is now like a top-security wing. I could offer lodging to the train robbers and, providing they didn't have a set of keys, they'd never get out of the house. So, with every window locked and every door double locked and reinforced, nothing gets into our house, including fresh air.

Meanwhile, the Aga is throwing out hot air like a small volcano. I look back, damp-eyed, to the days when I left the house with the windows wide open, the door unlocked, and Radio 4 left on loudly in the kitchen. I stupidly believed that potential burglars would arrive on the



doorstep, hear Sue Lawley asking her current castaway what luxury they would take to the island, then tiptoe away with an empty swag bag.

The above sentence, of course, is grammatically ambiguous. It could be read that Sue Lawley tiptoed away with a swag bag. I am not suggesting for a moment that Sue Lawley is a burglar; the very idea is unthinkable. She earns a good salary and her face is too well known. Though it is possible she could get away with it if she wore one of her own silk stockings over her face.

But anyway, the thought of Sue Lawley leaving Broadcasting House, driving to a quiet suburb, changing into an Armani burglary outfit to do a little genteel breaking and entering is quite absurd. Though, of course, you never really know about people.

*Wednesday* It is 9.30 in the morning and God only knows what the temperature is. Remember those photographs that used to appear on the front pages of the tabloid press of people frying eggs on the bonnets of their cars? The headline above would say, 'Phew, what a scorcher!' I swear it is that hot today. Delia Smith could cook a full English breakfast on my forehead, including fried bread.

I hope you celebrated Flea Week recently. Our cat Max certainly did. He brought vast amounts of them into the house, where they made themselves at home. Remember that song, 'C'mon over to my house, hey hey, we're having a party'? Well, they did come over to my house. When people ask me what the red swollen lumps are on my legs, I mumble, 'mosquito bites' and reach for the flea spray.

It's an uphill battle because the fleas adore the hothouse temperature at our place. It turns them on: when they are not jumping out and biting my legs, they are jumping on to each other. My sofas and chairs and carpets are now flea maternity wards. You can practically hear the champagne corks popping.

*Midday, 93 °F* All around me people are complaining about the heat. But it's our own fault if we can't cope. We have to change our habits, especially our clothes. A man has just walked past my window wearing a pinstriped business suit, waistcoat, shirt, tie and heavy brogue shoes. Would that man stroll along the promenade at Torremolinos in the same inappropriate outfit? Of course not. He'd be in an Englishman's holiday uniform – too-short running shorts, off-white vest, black socks, sandals and a plastic-trimmed captain's hat. He'd still look ludicrous, but at least he'd be dressed to suit the weather.

I felt a strong temptation to throw open the window and shout, 'Take your clothes off,' but I didn't. By the time I'd have found the key and unlocked the window, he'd have gone, and anyway my words could have been misinterpreted. He could have thought I was a mad, middle-aged woman who'd been affected by the heat. Whereas the truth is that I am a mad, middle-aged woman who has been affected by the burglars, the Aga, the fleas, but not the heat.



## Hosepipe Ban

I was walking through the grounds of Crystal Palace many years ago when I saw a notice board which was placed in the middle of a flower bed. Written on it, in large black letters, was the following notice: 'Do not throw stones at this notice board.' Puzzling. Surreal even. If the notice board hadn't been there in the first place, how could anybody throw stones at it? What was its purpose except as an example of officialdom gone mad?

Officialdom has been flexing its bossy muscles lately. I am a customer of Severn Trent Water and, at the time of writing, I am forbidden to use my hosepipe. This has deprived me of one of my greatest pleasures. I truly love my garden. I know every plant, every shrub, every tree. It hurts me to see them thirsty and wilting. I've given up on the lawn: it turned into a sullen delinquent years ago and is now totally beyond my control – if it's not careful, I'll turf it out and lay slabs.

I used to love directing a fine spray towards the parched plants and seeing them spring back to life. Watering also did me good. It calmed me down and took my mind off growing old, meeting deadlines and other worries. It was my own particular type of hydrotherapy. Now, since little rain has fallen, I am reduced to lugging heavy watering



cans around, which is bad for both my back and my temper. The worst is that Severn Trent Water has engaged helicopters and small planes to fly over its area and report anybody infringing the hosepipe ban.

Can you imagine the ludicrous conversations that must frequently take place between the pilot and Severn Trent HQ?

PILOT: Hose spy plane to HQ. I have a positive sighting. Repeat, I have a positive sighting. Over.

HQ: Details, hose spy plane. Over.

PILOT: 17 Acacia Avenue. Man with bald head wearing spectacles, plaid shirt and army-surplus-type shorts directing hosepipe towards group of sunflowers approximately seven feet tall. Over.

HQ (*excitedly*): Seven feet tall! He'll be easy to identify then, won't he? Old baldy? Over.

PILOT: No. The sunflowers are seven feet tall. He's turned the hose towards some containers of geraniums now. Want me to take photographs? Over.

HQ: Affirmative. What's he doing now? Over.

PILOT: He's shaking his fist at the sky. Over.

HQ: The computer tells us that he's Arthur Wainwright, a butcher aged fifty-seven. Good work, hose spy plane. We're sending Hose Ban enforcement officers to Acacia Avenue now. Over.

PILOT: What'll happen to him, HQ? Over.

HQ: He'll get fifty lashes with the nozzle end of a hosepipe on his bare buttocks in a public place — usually

the car park of a garden centre, a £1,000 fine and confiscation of his hosepipe and outside water tap. Over.

There are areas of the country where milkmen are being encouraged by the authorities to report any suspicious dawn-light activity. The scheme is called Milkwatch. I now look at my milkman in quite a different way and my notes to him have taken on a defensive, slightly paranoid tone.

*Dear Milkman,*

*I shall only want one pint a day until further notice. This is not because I have murdered my husband — he is alive and well, but he will be away for about a week, in Amsterdam. He assures me that he will not be smuggling diamonds either in or out of the country. Would you please leave me a pint of cream on Saturday, as we are having a small celebration (not to welcome a friend out of jail). Also, next Wednesday I shall need a dozen eggs.*

*Sue*

Will he reply like this in future?

*Dear Sue,*

*I'm sorry, but I am not able to supply you with a dozen eggs on Wednesday. John Selwyn Gummer, the cabinet minister, is visiting your locality and, knowing your views on him, I fear you might be tempted to use the aforementioned eggs as projectiles, thus causing a security incident.*

*Milkman*



*PS. Your cat was meowing on the doorstep at 1.30 this morning. If I find it there again, I will report you to the RSPCA.*

I don't know about you, but in future, after rinsing out my empty milk bottles, I will polish them thoroughly – to remove all fingerprints.

## Travelling through the Snow

Do you miss proper, deep, crunchy snow? The type that immobilizes cars and keeps people at home from work, and children from school? Yes, so do I. A heavy snowfall gives us all a breathing space, and, of course, it looks so beautiful. It softens outlines and gives off a wonderful light. At this time of year I watch the weather forecast and actually listen to what Michael Fish is saying instead of mocking his ties. I want to hear him say that the whole of Great Britain is going to be covered in snow for, well, let's say a month, to include the Christmas holiday. I know this is selfish, and that if I was the driver of a snow plough or a pensioner with unsteady legs, I'd no doubt shake my fists at the clouds overhead; but as I'm not either of these people, bear with me in my fantasy. What I really like is for transport to grind to a halt and a state of emergency to be declared. We don't like to admit it, but we British relish a state of emergency, we lead the world in stoicism, we are secretly made happy when we are forced to queue up for some vital resource. It gives us something to talk about other than *Coronation Street* or the royal family's latest indiscretion.

One of my granddaughters was born during Leicester's last heavy snowfall. She was in a maternity hospital a mile and a half from my house. The roads were blocked with



snow. A sensible person would have waited until the next day, when the roads had been tamed by the snow plough and the gritting lorry, but a primitive urge to see and hold this new member of our family took hold of me. I prepared to trek to the maternity hospital as though I were taking part in an Antarctic expedition. I took a flask of tea, food, spare gloves, socks and a torch, and set out.

I know about survival techniques – my husband used to run courses in survival. He would take a group of executives to a remote and inhospitable place, force them to eat worms and charge them rather a lot of money for the privilege.

Anyway, my expedition was not one of the greatest journeys of the world (as I said earlier, it was only a mile and a half), but it was rather marvellous: the sky blazed with stars and as I stumbled along, I felt quite cosmic and brave. I met other snow travellers on the way and we actually spoke to each other and swapped info about our final destinations. One man was making a noble attempt to get to the pub. I watched from a distance as he got to the front door, only to find it closed. His body slumped. I expect Captain Scott slumped in a similar way when told that the Norwegian flag was already flying at the South Pole.

I'm not the fittest woman in the world and I arrived at the maternity hospital in an enfeebled state. The hothouse atmosphere soon had me tearing off my endless layers of clothes. It was a fat, cold woman who entered from the street, but a thin, hot woman who went up in the lift, carrying a bundle of clothes.

The baby had been born with her blue eyes wide open, and at the age of three hours, they were still open, looking at me. She was worth every icy step. However, I was surprised to see so many other relatives and friends around the bedside. None of them, like me, showed the evidence of a trek in the snow. The women looked well-groomed, glamorous even. I was certainly the only woman there with plastic freezer bags lining (and showing above the tops of) my hefty, fur-lined boots. 'How did you get here?' I gasped. 'In the car,' somebody said. It took the wind out of my sails a bit.

But recently, when the blue-eyed baby – who is now four – couldn't get to sleep, I told her the story of how I had walked through the snow to see her on the day she was born, and she was very pleased. I may have elaborated a little, added a blizzard or two, and I certainly didn't mention that her other visitors had arrived by car.

Incidentally, if you and the children are so desperate to see snow at Christmas that you are thinking of taking a day trip to Lapland to see Santa in his snow-bound grotto, think again. For the past few years, snow has been very thin on the ground there. Thin to the point of nonexistence. Sadly, I have to say that Lapland without snow lacks charm. And it's a long way to go with over-excited children only to end up on a windswept tundra that looks as though it is lit by a 20-watt bulb. I know, I've been there, and I've got the reindeer-horn drinking cups to prove it.



## Expelled from the Writers' Club

I lay on my bed fully dressed, with a patch over one eye and sunglasses, and watched my eldest daughter pack my suitcase. I was lying down because I was too tired to stand up, and I was wearing the patch and sunglasses combo because . . . no, it's too boring to go into. It is. It really is.

My daughter's brief was to pack suitable clothes for two weeks on a Greek island in October. The island is called Skyros, which means wind, so this was no easy shorts 'n' T-shirt type of packing. My suitcase is small, the same type that air stewardesses wheel on and off aeroplanes with such economy of movement. I wasn't going on holiday, though; I was going to teach writing to fifteen adults. Not just any old writing: in two weeks they were going to write a poem and their own obituary (sounds morbid, I know, but all the obituaries were funny). They wrote a monologue (as a member of the opposite sex), a radio play, the opening of a film and the first page of their novel.

I always feel a bit of a fraud before I embark on this teaching stint. I haven't got an O level or GCSE to my name, and the only time I ever set foot in a university as a young woman was to enter a twist competition. While we're at it, I may as well confess to failing my 11-plus and also (this is truly humiliating) my cycling proficiency test. I think you'll agree that these non-qualifications are best



kept from nervous writing students. I have been working as a professional writer for eighteen years, but I am still expecting a fax message saying:

*To: Sue Townsend*

*From: The Society for the Exposure of Unworthy Writers*

*You have been found out. You must leave the writing profession immediately. A vacancy has been found at the biscuit factory. You will be packing Bourbon Creams from 7.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m., six days a week, at a speed determined by the management. An overall and an unflattering hairnet must be worn at all times.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Edna Grubbe*

*Secretary*

I can hear some of you muttering, 'About time too.' Most of the writers I know are waiting for the same kind of calamity to befall them. Writers are driven creatures, beset with anxieties and having the confidence of a retarded lugworm. If somebody at a party tells me my last book or play was rubbish, I don't run weeping from the room, I agree with them. 'Yes!' I laugh happily. 'You've found me out, I'm not a proper writer!' The writers I know all feel the same way. There are two exceptions. Both men. Small men. One has a beard, the other is fat. Both are best-sellers. I'd love to give you their names. My pen is itching to . . . but as I don't want to spend weeks in the High Court or give a barrister £1,000 a day to defend me on a defamation charge, I'll draw back from the brink.

No, I can't let the subject drop. These men think every sentence they write is precious and perfect and wasted on their swinish readers. I read an interview with one of these men recently – the bearded one: 'Writing is a job,' he said. 'I don't lie awake worrying about it.' I threw many curses at the photograph of his horrible, smug face and remembered the statement about writing with which I most closely identify: 'writing is easy, all you have to do is stare at a blank piece of paper until your forehead bleeds'.

So, I arrived on the island with a bundle of insecurities and anxieties, a bag of medication, and a face free of make-up – a rare and sorry sight. I had left my cosmetics bag in the lavatory at Athens airport. Some lucky woman is swanning around with my duty-free Chanel lipstick on her thieving chops.

Within two days, the writers' group bonded. We laughed ourselves stupid, cried occasionally, had our siestas, then danced and made very merry indeed in the evenings. We also worked extremely hard.

It was only towards the end of the second week that I let slip that I was not in any way qualified to teach writing. But by then they didn't care; they had all written something they were proud to read aloud. I admire teachers, but I couldn't bear to teach in Britain. The teaching aids I need are a sunlit, terraced classroom with a sea and mountain view, a taverna-lined main street, cobbled and too narrow for cars. Bougainvillaea, vines heavy with grapes, trees decorated with pomegranates, Greek salads, a fantastical townscape of white cubist houses climbing up a



hillside, and a late-night bar serving extravagantly large drinks and playing smoky jazz until 3.30 a.m. I'll have to blag it out with the writing. I couldn't possibly get up at 7.30 a.m. to pack the Bourbon Creams, and I'd look hideous in that hairnet.

## To Do List

1 p.m. I've just come back from visiting my dentist after a gap (perhaps the word should be cavity) of six years. I kept meaning to ring for an appointment but somehow never got round to it. It has been on my List of Important Things to Do for . . . well, six years.

I have seen my dentist in the intervening years but it wasn't in his surgery; it was in the bar of the Haymarket Theatre. He kindly bought me a drink and I promised to ring him, but unfortunately I was on strong painkillers (for toothache) at the time. I think they must have affected my memory because it quite slipped my mind to ring him for an appointment. My dentist is a kind man, patients travel from abroad to see him. He is a hero to my children. His work is painless. He cares about each tooth in your head, so I can't explain the six-year gap.

'I will treat you as if you are two-and-a-half years old,' he once said to me reassuringly. I think he is the only man I've ever known to recognize my true age.

My List of Important Things to Do is (not in order of importance):

- 1 Make and sign a will
- 2 Throw sequined sweaters out of the wardrobe
- 3 Have sewerage pipes x-rayed



4 Ring dentist

5 Walk two miles a day

6 Finish 50,000-word novel

7 Transfer conifer from tub to permanent place in garden

8 Reply to 1994 letters

9 Throw away all underwear ruined in wash

10 Reply to 1995 letters

Perhaps I could take this opportunity to apologize to friends and strangers who may have written to me in 1994 and 1995. I intend to reply to your letters one day. It's just that I let things slip in 1995 and now, in 1996, I have this towering, slithering mountain of correspondence that I shall need oxygen to conquer.

4.30 p.m. I've decided to tackle the list. I've just been upstairs and taken the sequined sweaters out of the wardrobe and then trawled through cupboards and drawers for underwear casualties. I don't know about you, but whenever I buy new underwear I swear to myself that I'll handwash it in special lotion, that I'll pat it dry with absorbent paper and I'll iron it on a special low setting. So why is it that I've just rounded up a pile of sad, grey garments that are about as alluring as John Major's upper lip? I could blame my husband – who is currently out of the country selling canoes to Scandinavians – but that wouldn't be fair.

I'm going shopping now, so there isn't time for the two-mile walk, but who knows? When I come back, perhaps I'll take a stroll around the neighbourhood and check out the security lights on the neighbours' houses.

As for x-raying the sewerage pipes, well, quite honestly I can't face it. I keep remembering the emergency plumber's face when he broke the news to us that the pipe (which runs under the kitchen floor, for some inexplicable reason) seemed to have 'restricted flow'. His expression was grave – how an actor playing a TV doctor looks when he or she is informing an actor patient that they've got a fortnight to live. No. I'll face the pipes x-ray when I feel stronger in body and in mind. There's only so much a woman can do, especially a heavily burgled woman such as myself.

So, that leaves the pipes, the will and the novel. I don't know if you have written your will. It does concentrate the mind wonderfully. You sit there with your solicitor and advisers chatting merrily about their life after your death.

Any eccentric thoughts you may have about imposing conditions on the beneficiaries ('I leave each of my children x pounds each, providing they never marry, go to church twice on Sunday and breed pigs') are quickly dismissed, and the solicitor gently guides you into more prosaic language.

2.20 a.m. Today, I've been shopping and bought enough food for a siege. I've given a telephone interview to a journalist in Australia and I've written 1,000 words of the novel, but I can't help asking – what's it all about, Alfie? Is it just for the moment we live?

Perhaps the lists we all make represent the future. But whatever they damn well mean, there must be more to life than ticking off the items, one by one.



lover of the Prince of Wales! She started the letter: 'Just to say, Sue, you are a BITCH!' There were a few more abusive paragraphs, then this: 'I am certain that you are one of Prince Charles's cast-off lovers.' This woman objected to some critical remarks I'd made about Princess Diana.

She went on to write, 'Just try to be a woman for once in your life, just pretend to be a woman and imagine how a woman would feel when she had been badly treated by a man.' She signed the letter, 'A Daily Mail reader.'

Here's my reply.

Dear Daily Mail reader,

Thank you for your anonymous letter. You are entirely wrong in your supposition that I am the spurned and jealous ex-lover of Prince Charles. I couldn't fancy a man who habitually wears a blazer. Men in blazers remind me of crooked insurance salesmen. I also dislike those slip-on patent slippers Prince Charles wears to evening functions. I like my men to wear chunky shoes.

I realize that, so far, my refutation of your wild premiss is based entirely on what may seem to you to be frivolous, sartorial grounds, but these things are important to me. I once fell instantly out of love with a man because he returned from the barber's with his hair cut too short.

You ask me to imagine what it is like to be badly treated by a man. Excuse me while I laarf. I am fifty next year. I went out with my first boy/man when I was fourteen. I don't need to imagine what it is like to be badly treated by a man. I gave up acting at sixteen because a man said I looked 'bloody stupid' on stage. I tried to hide my profile for years because another man chucked me

and gave as his reason, 'your nose is too big'. I could go on, but I won't. There are too many instances of similar male cruelties.

Believe me, I have every sympathy with Princess Diana's marital dilemma. There may well have been four people in her marriage, but the fourth person was not me. I have been far too busy with my family and my work to indulge myself in a royal romance, and, anyway, what makes you think Charles would be attracted to me? I'm scared of horses and would be hopeless on the moors, shooting at birds and small animals. Finally, I have never laughed at The Goon Show. I would leave the room instantly if Charles started doing his infamous Goon impressions. I'm a Jack Dee woman.

Have I succeeded in convincing you that Prince Charles and I have not had a torrid affair? I hope so. I also hope that you have not blabbed your mad suspicions to your neighbours and friends, or to the stationer where you buy your horrible red pens.

I must warn you, Daily Mail reader, that, should it come to my attention that you have been publicly linking Charles and myself, I will set several Leicester City councillors (whom I have in my power) on to you. You have been warned.

Yours sincerely,

Sue Townsend

(Marxism Today and Daily Telegraph reader)



## Out on the Razz

On Tuesday of this week I had the great pleasure of participating in an event that gave money to the deserving poor. It was nothing to do with the Lottery, though the poor people in this case were playwrights, and they had won £5,000 apiece.

The Pearson Television Playwrights Scheme organizes this annual prizegiving. Their motives, though laudable, are not entirely altruistic. Television needs writers. Without writers it would turn its tube to the corner of the room and die. It's a fact that quite a lot of seemingly intelligent television reviewers do not realize that writers are involved in the production of a drama. Actors are used to fans approaching them in the street and saying, 'I saw you in that thing on TV last night. I don't know how you make those words up on the spur of the moment, but what you said was very clever/very funny/made me cry.'

A few actors accept this badly misguided praise. 'How very kind,' they murmur modestly whilst scribbling their immodest, flamboyant signatures inside the fan's autograph book or whichever crumpled piece of paper is dredged up from the bottom of a handbag. Other, more honest, actors tell the blunt truth: 'I don't make the words up. A writer does.' But this does not usually go down too well. It's a bit like trying to explain to a ten-year-old child that Michael



Jackson used to be black or that Dame Edna Everage is actually a man called Barry Humphries who has a taste for high culture and a particular interest in classical literature.

So I am obviously pleased to be a part of a scheme that celebrates and encourages young playwrights. In truth, they are not that young, but these things are relative. I'm used to seeing twelve-year-old policemen flexing their batons. I was in a shop recently when a fraught customer, holding a faulty purse, called for the manager. To my surprise, I saw an eight-year-old girl stroll out of the back room. This child (who should have been at home playing mummies and daddies with Barbie and Ken) proceeded to reel off a whole clause of the Consumer Protection Act as it related to the purse, whose press stud had fallen off some three months earlier. Anyway, I mustn't get sidetracked, though I have to say that, unusually for me, my sympathies this time lay with the shop. The owner of the purse looked to me as though she'd be very heavy on a press stud. She'd obviously violently wrenched her purse open one too many times; and anyway, why wait three months to complain? She said herself that she worked in the town. Why not call in and complain on the first day that the purse failed to fasten? Anyway, I mustn't get sidetracked. But I'll just tell you the outcome of this small human drama. The child/manageress offered the woman a credit note for the cost of the purse (which was very magnanimous of her, I thought). The complainant then cast a cursory eye over the huge range of purses on sale and declared that she didn't like a single one of them and wanted £9.99 cash in hand. At this point, I wanted to join

in and remonstrate with the purse woman, but I managed to draw back from the brink, only allowing myself to signal my solidarity with the child/manageress by a system of smiles and eye-rolling. Anyway, as I said earlier, I mustn't get sidetracked.

After the playwrights' cheques had been handed out, there was a small reception: drink was taken, vegetables were dipped, and we posed for photographs. Eventually, people drifted away, leaving only the playwrights, a playwright's dancer girlfriend, a few bottles of wine and myself. A dangerous combination.

Much, much later, our party fell into a black cab, and the last I saw of the playwrights and the dancer was them standing in a Soho street waving happily as my cab sped me to St Pancras station and the train to Leicester.

At 11.30 p.m. I phoned my husband from the train using the words that are so mocked by those who despise mobile phones: 'Hello. I'm on the train.' I had slept past Kettering, Market Harborough and Leicester, and God knows where else, and awoke to find myself in a stationary train on a dark, deserted railway station. My footsteps echoed as I walked out of the station. Nottingham was devoid of humans. Taxi drivers were snoring under their duvets. A man wearing a neck brace let me into a small hotel near the station. 'Cash only,' he said suspiciously. I've rarely seen so much Formica in such a small space, but I slept soundly enough. In the morning I looked out of the bedroom window and saw that the canal, murky and deep, lay below. I thought briefly about throwing myself in but decided that life, even for somebody as stupid as me, has to go on.



## Dream House

'There's a house with a wood for sale in Quorn,' I said casually. My husband knows that under my mild-mannered, good-humoured persona lies another person: a cross between Pol Pot and Joan Crawford. I never make casual remarks. Accordingly, he got the message and switched on the indicator and we turned towards Quorn.

Quorn is not the headquarters of the meat substitute so beloved of vegetarians, it is a large village full of des reses. The hip 'n' thigh flat stomach magnate Rosemary Conley lives there. In fact, the river that makes the village so 'des' runs through her property. I expect it pulls its stomach in as it rushes by.

The house was called One Ash. There was a picture of a bad-tempered, growling Alsatian on the padlocked gate. I can't remember whether I climbed over the gate or limbo'd beneath it. I was in a fever of excitement because I had seen the wood.

Recent photographs of me may suggest that I spent my infancy, childhood and adult life in a subterranean nightclub, but I grew up surrounded by woods. As a small child I climbed the trees and made dens in the scrubby undergrowth. I collected conkers and acorns in the autumn, and picked the celandines and primroses in the spring. In the summer I took a bottle of water and a jam sandwich



and had a picnic in the dark shade, and in the winter, in the snow (it always snowed when I was a child), I would take great delight in being the first to put my wellington prints on to the snowy woodland floor. I got to know each tree very well, and when most of the wood was cut down to make way for housing, I was heartbroken.

'It's going cheap because it's been vandalized,' I said to my husband as we walked up the long driveway through the wood. 'But it's thirteen acres.' He didn't flinch. He didn't point out that we found it difficult to find the time to tend our present garden, which is the size of a large slice of bread and has only five trees. We couldn't yet see the house, but we saw a paddock in the distance. We passed an overgrown tennis court with a sagging net, and a piece of open ground with a summer house.

Then we turned a corner and walked up a slight incline, and there was the house. Dark and boarded-up, looking like something out of a horror film; I expected to see lightning and hear thunder and the sound of a distant scream. We walked round the back of the house to look at the outbuildings and the smashed orangery and greenhouses. A swimming pool was full of slime and rubbish, but the garden – even in winter – was lovely. There were ponds and a brick-built pergola, and everywhere trees and the glorious intermingling smells of conifers and rotting leaves. I felt weak with desire. I wanted it. I wanted it before I had seen the front of the house, or been inside it. I could see my grandchildren running through the woods. I could see myself writing in the summer house. I could see my husband replacing every single one of the

hundred panes of glass in the orangery. (Strangely enough, he didn't share this particular vision.)

When I saw the front of the house, I thought I would faint with pleasure. There were shutters and a pretty Edwardian wrought-iron balcony, and a lovely front door. A pale man covered in coal dust came out. He was carrying a torch. Did we 'want to see inside the house'?

'Yes,' I wanted to shout, 'of course we want to see inside the house. It is our house. We are going to live here.'

The batteries were going in the pale man's torch, and every window was boarded up from the outside, so we stumbled around in deep blackness. But I did glimpse beautiful window frames, ceilings, floors and fireplaces, and vowed that I would live here and make it light and warm and welcoming. We thanked the pale man and he went back to huddle over his coal fire.

I was back the next day with my sister Kate and my two daughters. Kate was enthusiastic, but the girls recoiled in horror. We drove to the estate agents, where a young man told me that the house was about to be sold, for cash.

'Anyway,' said my relieved daughter, looking at my disconsolate face as we drove home. 'You couldn't live in a house called One Ash.'

'What would you call it?' I asked her as I lit yet another cigarette. 'Fag Ash?' she suggested. We all laughed, but my laughter was more hollow than theirs.



## Max the Fat Cat

I swore I'd never do this: join the columnists who write about their damned cats.

Our cat has gone mad. He sits in the front hall and cries to be let out. Once outside he runs around to the back of the house and cries to be let back in. As soon as he's inside again he runs to the hall and cries to be let out. Round and round and round. Does he think he's a goldfish?

His name is Max and I think he suffers from a depressive illness of some kind. He looks like he bears the problems of the world on his furry shoulders: as though he is in charge of Middle Eastern peace talks or responsible for the compilation of a British Rail timetable. He wears a permanently miserable expression. He has never looked happy, even as a kitten. Perhaps he was taken away from his mother at too early an age, but he never *played*. If you waggled a ball of wool in front of him, he would gaze at it with a bleak expression, like an actor in an Ingmar Bergman film, and then walk away. He was the most joyless kitten I have ever known. He is now ten. One look at his face and I start to question the point of animal and human existence. Why *are* we here?

He has a serious eating disorder; this is because he is also a pathological liar. People come and go in our house all the time, and Max manages to convince each resident



and each visitor that he has been starved of nourishment for a week. He has got the loudest and most irritating cat voice I have ever heard. I'm surprised the council's environmental health people haven't been round before now with their decibel counting machine. Sometimes he is fed as much as six times a day. As a consequence he is grossly fat; I've seen motorists slow down and goggle at him as he waddles along the pavement.

He is also stupid. Our house is chock-a-block with sofas and beds. There is even a cat basket, yet the fool chooses to sleep in the centre of the bottom step of the stairs, exactly where the humans need to walk. Naturally his sleep is constantly being disturbed by stumbling, swearing people. If I'm ever found at the foot of the stairs in a crumpled heap, with a fading pulse, you'll know who to blame – Max. And will he mourn for me? I don't think so. I'm just the schmuck who shells out for his cat food.

Another example of his stupidity: he once fell asleep with his head so close to an open fire that he burnt his whiskers off. Consequently, without these aids to width and distance, he was unable to pass through open doorways or yard-wide gaps in hedges until the whiskers had grown back.

I think he hates me. I sometimes turn my head and catch him looking at me with a contemptuous, judgemental expression on his face. He always looks away quickly, but not before he's left me feeling disturbed, anxious and, for some reason, guilty.

I have a friend who is a fanatical cat lover. (You know the type: they visit you in hospital and enquire after your cat's health.) When this cat lover visits our house, Max

goes into Orphan Annie mode. He shivers in the corner and whines pitifully. He even manages to make himself look *thin*. And, of course, he has managed somehow to remove his collar and name tag and to tangle his fur up and play host to millions of fleas.

'Poor Max,' she cries, and she swoops him into her arms and kisses his face before feeding him and grooming him and talking to him as though he were a person.

'All he needs is some love and attention,' says the friend reproachfully as she carries the turncoat upstairs to the guest bedroom, where he will sleep with his traitorous head on her pillow. There is no point in protesting to her that the cat is *acting* in an attempt to discredit me. My friend is convinced that the cat is emotionally and physically deprived. When I complained recently about cat hairs on my clothing, she snapped, 'Then stop wearing black.'

Another thing I've got against Max is how badly he treats his cat friends. In particular a pathetic creature with three legs and a sulky face. Sometimes he beats her up in the garden. At other times he invites her to share his dinner. But I don't think Three Legs and Max are having a sexual relationship. He is sexually confused. When he was an adolescent the vet ventured the opinion that Max was homosexual, but in my opinion Max is asexual. Three Legs will never bear his kittens.

Sadly, Max was run over recently. I phoned home with the news. 'How badly was he hurt?' asked my husband. 'About two hundred pounds' worth,' I said, looking at the vet's bill.

Do they prescribe Prozac for cats?



## Mr and Mrs Blue Hair

I know that I've been claiming for some time that I'm fifty years old, but I've been working on the Chinese principle that a person's true age should be calculated from the day (or night) of their conception. But I am now, occasionally speaking, fifty. If forty is a dangerous age, then fifty has got to be, well, far more dangerous.

People *retire* at fifty these days. We've all seen the pension advertisements featuring that smugly smiling blue-haired couple striding across the golf course, or taking tea in the garden, their gleaming dentures about to bite into a home-baked scone.

We sometimes see Mr and Mrs Blue Hair sailing their dinghy on what looks like an estuary in Essex. Curiously, although the sail of the dinghy is full of wind, the couple's hair remains helmet-like – not a single blue hair is ever out of place. I feel sorry for Mr and Mrs Blue Hair. Not only are they condemned to using a full can of hair spray before they go sailing, they are also fated to live lives of full-time leisure. Leisure with a capital L.

Judging from the advertisements, their average day begins with breakfast in a hotel room. Mrs Blue Hair, elegant in a lace-trimmed negligée, Mr in silk dressing gown. Through the window can be seen the immaculate fairways of the hotel golf course, on which they will soon



be tramping with the golfing equipment bought with the pension plan.

Lunchtime sees them sitting in the garden of a country pub (thatched) sipping their horrible alcohol-free drinks. The early afternoon is taken up with the aforementioned dinghy sailing. By tea time they are antiques-hunting in a Cotswold village. One of them, usually Mrs Blue Hair, is holding up a hideous artefact for the approval of the other. By early evening they are back in the hotel, dressing for dinner. Mr Blue Hair is fastening the clasp on Mrs Blue Hair's necklace. Sometimes their hands are touching.

Does Mrs Blue Hair fear that Mr Blue Hair will take his hands from the necklace and place them around her neck and strangle her? Perhaps with the cry, 'I cannot stand the thought of spending another minute of leisure with you!' No, of course not. Because there they are, in the hotel restaurant, clinking their long-stemmed glasses together and congratulating each other on their foresight in arranging such a generous pension plan. Even later we see them dancing decorously together, Mr Blue Hair keeping his distance from his wife, unlike many men of his age who have drunk too much and go in for a bit of pelvic thrusting on the dance floor.

And off to bed we presume. But we never actually *see* them in bed. Sex is a leisure activity Mr and Mrs Blue Hair don't appear to indulge in. Presumably because sex is still free (it would be difficult to privatize), and even impecunious people without pension plans are still able to indulge themselves in this pleasurable leisure-time activity. No expensive equipment is needed, unless your tastes are *very*

specialized, and the wearing of clothing is positively discouraged, again unless . . .

We do know that Mr and Mrs Blue Hair had a sexual relationship in the past, because we occasionally see them visiting the grandchildren. Though really the grandchildren are an excuse; what the Blue Hairs are doing is showing off again. What they truly want us to see is their new saloon car, and their swanky matching luggage (the car boot is open), bought and paid for by the pension plan.

What we never see is the Blue Hairs bickering over whose turn it is to empty the stinking pedal-bin. We certainly don't see them arguing over the remote control, or complaining that the grandchildren have lost the tiny key to Mrs Blue Hair's vanity case at some time during their visit.

We are not allowed to think that retirement at fifty is anything less than leisure-filled heaven. In the world inhabited by the Blue Hairs, the best things in life are not free. They are bought in shops. Sometimes I see a wistful expression on Mr Blue Hair's face. I think he misses his workplace and his former colleagues.

And Mrs Blue Hair, she's not a happy woman, she wants her old life back, the one she had before he retired. A little light charity work in the morning. A library book and Oprah Winfrey in the afternoon.

Mrs Blue Hair is tired of golf and hotels and country pubs and dinghies, and dancing to the hotel quintet. She wants to slob out and relax and let her blue hair blow in the wind. And so do I.



## Lovely Roundabout

There is a large traffic island near to where I live. I pass it nearly every day and always look on it fondly, because this is no ordinary traffic island. Built out of Westmorland stone, it is covered in trees and shrubs and flowers and rocky plants. In the spring, when the bulbs burst into flower, it looks particularly delightful. In the summer, herbaceous plants wave in the breeze, and when these finally die away there is a display of autumn foliage and berries to delight the eye.

This traffic island is a Leicester landmark. I not only admire it, I am also *proud* of it. This may make me sound like the ultimate nerd, but I don't care. There is anger in my bosom because the council transport division wants to replace it with three sets of traffic lights, 'to increase the traffic flow'. When I first heard about this dastardly plan, the blood traffic flow to my heart almost stopped.

Leicester has traffic lights like centipedes have legs. Visitors rub their eyes in disbelief when faced with the sight of Belgrave Road, which looks like an amber, red and green hell. These lights stretch to the horizon and beyond, possibly to infinity. Recently we Leicester citizens have seen the proliferation of painted road markings. Every main road seems to have been painted with diagonal lines,



boxes or shark's-teeth patterns, and bigger and bossier signs. They'll be painting 'Stop smoking!' or 'Have you brushed your teeth?' on the damned roads next.

I had better admit right now that I am not a driver, but I have owned a car. It was a cabriolet, grey and sleek, and when I saw it in the window of the car showroom I went in and bought it. (I'd only nipped out for a loaf of bread.) I imagined myself behind the wheel, wearing a headscarf and pigskin driving gloves, driving skilfully down a dangerous mountain pass, somewhere abroad, on my way to the coast. I was chatting and making jokes in fluent French to my companion. (Remember, this was only in my imagination; in real life my French is *très mal*. I once ordered a meal for my children from a French menu and was presented with a huge basket full of raw vegetables that had only recently been torn from the ground.)

I got myself a provisional licence and asked my husband to sit next to me while I drove the sleek, grey cabriolet around the Leicestershire countryside. When I drove along the grass verge he would gently suggest that I might find it more comfortable to drive on the road. When I exceeded the speed limit (by 30 mph) he hinted that it might be a good idea to ease my foot off the accelerator. Emboldened by my jaunts in the countryside, I decided to take a crash course, at the end of which I would take my driving test.

I was recommended to go to a certain driving instructor. Let's call him 'M'. He had a very good reputation and was responsible for many first-time passes. Unfortunately,

the week of my crash course was also M's disaster week. Every thing that could go wrong with a man's life went wrong in that week. I spent the week driving M from the site of one domestic and business disaster to the next.

It has to be said that I was an unruly pupil. I resented stopping at traffic lights and seemed congenitally unable to keep to the speed limit. Also, I hated driving *behind* anything. Poor M, who was famous for his cool nerves, began to bite his nails. By the seventh day he was twitching somewhat. On day eight I took my test.

Mr Smith was my examiner. After eleven attempts to do a three-point turn I offered to let him leave the car, but he declined. M watched from the first floor of the examiner's headquarters as I stalled the car across two lanes of the dual carriageway. For the first time in a week he was smiling.

I have never driven a car since. My children were thrilled to get their hands on the sleek, grey cabriolet but, after a few weeks of nightmares in which I saw them come to messy ends in the sleek one, I put it up for sale. 'One careful lady driver. 1,000 miles on the clock.' Naturally, nobody believed it and the car sold for far less than I paid for it. So much less that I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night and remember *exactly* how much less.

On Sunday, the 'Save Our Roundabout Campaign' held a protest picnic on the island. I meant to join them but completely forgot. But I want them to know that I'm behind them; so is my family. My ex-brother-in-law has said he will 'do a Newbury' and tie himself to the tree that stands



in the middle if the bulldozers dare approach. There is so little that is beautiful in our cities in 1996, so little to gladden the eye. So I beseech Leicester City Council to spare our lovely traffic island. I'm not above threats, either. Destroy that island and I may take up driving again.

## In Melbourne

I was in Australia when Isabelle was born. My normal procedure for visiting a newborn grandchild is to storm the maternity hospital, whatever the hour, push through the doors marked 'Private' and grab the child to my bosom and welcome it to the family. I'm normally quite polite when it comes to the social conventions, but when the family are involved I lose all constraint. I think I must have Mafia blood in me. I haven't inherited the drug-dealing and contract-killing gene, but I think I may have inherited the 'family-first' gene. I've probably passed it on to my sons. Last year my youngest daughter's potential boyfriends had to pass a series of scrupulous tests of character and have their past histories examined. The poor girl was like a princess in a fairy tale. Suitor after suitor was rejected. She would often return from a night out with a sad story about the Townsend brothers escorting yet another hapless youth away from her side on the dance floor. His crime was sometimes very trivial (he was known to habitually wear white socks), or more serious (being a serial womanizer with several children scattered around the East Midlands). My sons assured me that they were saving their sister a lot of heartbreak, and perhaps they were right. She now has a very nice boyfriend who has the full approval of all the family. My eyes lit up when



I heard that he was a plumber. I have spent a fortune on the mad plumbing in our house over the years, so it will be marvellous to have a plumber on tap. I am encouraging the girl to have a long-term romance.

Isabelle is two-and-a-half weeks old now, and I haven't seen her or held her yet. She looks beautiful in the photograph my husband brought out to me. I can't stop showing this photograph to strangers. So far I have shown it to a woman I spoke to in a toilet in Sydney, a Greek taxi driver, an assistant in a dress shop in Melbourne, and anybody else who will slow down long enough to look. I'm already grateful to Isabelle because she gave her mother so little pain. Four gentle contractions and she was born, which surprised everyone present – especially the mother, who asked, 'Is that my baby?' So take heart, pregnant women everywhere – it could happen to you.

I am in Melbourne at the moment publicizing the opening of *The Queen and I*, my play about the Queen and the royal family being exiled to an outer suburb of Sydney. I did a live radio interview last week, and a woman called Sylvia rang in and said I should be thrown off the top of the radio station building (twenty-two storeys). She then calmed down somewhat and said I should be hanged by my neck from the flagpole. But ardent monarchists such as Sylvia are quite thin on the ground here in Australia. In fact, Britain has very little influence on the everyday life of Australians. English fashion is the exception, but one wonders why: Australian designers use wonderful fabrics and cutting techniques, and make their clothes for all ages and sizes of women – not just for teenage stick insects.

It is winter here and Australians are walking around in an incredible variety of clothes. Somebody wearing a T-shirt, shorts and flip-flops can be followed down the street by a person dressed in big boots, moleskin trousers, a sweater and a greatcoat. The only dress rule I have seen on the window of restaurants and bars states: 'Shoes must be worn'.

I was having breakfast in a hotel this morning when I looked up and saw my name in big letters outside the theatre opposite. I almost choked on my boiled egg. To succeed in persuading a thousand people a night to leave their homes and go to a theatre to watch a play seems an impossible thing to do. At this moment I am beset by fear and anxiety. This makes me clumsy. The director, Max Stafford-Clark, purses his lips in the rehearsal room as a pile of my rewritten pages slithers to the floor. I know I am the writer from hell and I wouldn't work with me again for a million pounds.

I think the editor of this magazine must be cursing the day he invited me to be a contributor. 'Where's Townsend's copy?' I can hear him shouting (though he is the mildest, most even-tempered of men). The fact that I am 12,000 miles away is no excuse for the fact that this article is now four days late. Fax machines have made such excuses redundant. So, what can I blame? Jet lag? No, I'm over that now. Laziness? No – if only I had the *time* to be lazy. No, it's the fear of putting words down on paper. I think I am suffering from wordaphobia. I may have to consult a doctor and ask him or her to send a sick note to the editor.



## Plane Trauma

The preview audiences for *The Queen and I* (the Australian version) laughed their socks off. But the first-night audience only laughed one sock off and the newspaper critics kept both socks resolutely on; to say that they loathed the play would be a gross understatement. I sat up in bed in my hotel room in Melbourne and read the reviews, then sank back on to the pillows while words such as 'puerile', 'unfunny' and 'sitcom' danced in front of my eyes. I think at some stage I might have pulled the blankets over my head and whimpered. I know that when I emerged into the daylight I looked longingly towards the minibar, where instant oblivion – in the form of strong alcohol – resided, but as it was only 8.30 in the morning I made myself a cup of tea instead. I then did my packing and left for the airport.

I had delayed my return to England by one day because I wanted a smoking flight, but when I checked in, a clean-cut youth informed me that the flight was now non-smoking. I nearly burst into tears (if there are any children reading this, never put a cigarette between your lips. *Never*. You will have a permanent cough, you will stink, and you will humiliate yourself in front of youths at airport check-in desks). The entire airport is non-smoking, so I stood outside in the company of other addicts and smoked many cigarettes until the 'now boarding' sign



flashed. Each fag tasted disgusting, but an addict is addicted, so they *had* to be smoked.

'What about willpower?' I hear you mutter. 'What about it?' I reply. I have no willpower. The part of my brain that controls willpower has been invaded by the nicotine-craving gang, and they take no prisoners.

The plane took off normally enough, but as we began to climb I noticed some discomfort in my ears. My fellow passengers began shaking their heads and poking their ears with their fingers. Babies began to scream. By the time the captain announced that the plane had reached its cruising height of 35,000 feet I thought my head was going to burst. Then the oxygen masks came down. The only time I had seen that happen before was on aeroplane-disaster movies. Being English, I kept my head, though I did turn to the man in the grey suit next to me and smile. A novelist would have called it a wry smile. Mr Grey Suit raised his eyebrows and took the oxygen mask dangling in front of him and placed the rubber mouthpiece over his mouth. I did the same. No oxygen came out. The cabin crew were nowhere to be seen, and the captain was now worryingly silent. Meanwhile, the pressure inside my head was becoming intolerable. The cause could have been delayed shock brought on by the terrible reviews, but I've had bad reviews before without my head bursting.

Diagonally opposite me sat a man who could have been the fattest man in Australia on his way to represent his country in an international fat man competition. He had more chins than Niagara has falls, and they were almost as wet. He mopped at his face with a white handkerchief

that could have doubled as a sail for a small ship. He caught my eye and said, 'I could use a drink.' I took my mouth away from the mask and gave another of my wry smiles. I saw him press the button for the stewardess, but nobody came. Had the entire crew parachuted to safety? Eventually the captain turned on his intercom. There was the sound of ragged, heavy breathing. Was he having some sort of seizure?

'This is your captain. We are ...', then more ragged breathing. Meanwhile, I filled in the gaps. I am a dramatist, after all. I might be a discredited and reviled one, but I am still able to dramatize. I imagined the captain barely alive, the co-pilot dead.

The captain finally managed to control himself. 'There is a fault with the cabin pressure,' he said, 'and also with the oxygen supply.' We would be making a fast descent to 10,000 feet and would then fly over the sea to jettison our fuel. 'For an emergency landing,' groaned the fattest man in Australia. The wobbly descent lasted long enough for me to write an overwrought and dramatic letter of farewell to my family, and for the fattest man in Australia to struggle out of his seat and help himself, me and Mr Grey Suit to a miniature gin. We didn't bother with the ice and lemon. After ditching its fuel the plane flew shakily back to Melbourne and landed, escorted by emergency vehicles.

In the transit lounge I asked an airport official if a small section could be roped off so that the thirty or so smokers on the flight could light up and repair their jangled nerves. 'No,' she said severely. 'It's the Health and Safety rules.' I gave a wry smile.



## Grandma at Large

I don't claim to be a good parent. Far from it. I've made many mistakes and I'm still making them. In fact I'm now making mistakes as a grandparent. I recently tried to encourage my grandson Niall into developing a passion for stamp-collecting. I bought the poor boy a bag of mixed stamps from Australia. Under my dictatorship he spent one night of a recent weekend visit sorting the stamps into little piles. There was a Koala pile and a Kangaroo pile and a Famous Aussie Athletes pile. The next night he was encouraged to stick the stamps into a stamp album – I was quite strict about how exactly he stuck the stamps in.

The boy did as he was told, but I could see that he wanted to ask 'Why? What is the purpose of this mindless, repetitive activity, Grandma?' He politely kept his mouth shut, but when I suggested that he might have had enough, he jumped down from the table and was in the other room watching television before you could say 'koala'. His sister, the five-year-old blonde bombshell, was already in there drinking a cocktail and watching *Lolita* on the television. (Before you report me to the NSPCC, let me say that the cocktails consisted of virulently coloured pop, ice, a drinking straw, a plastic palm tree, a monkey on a stick and a paper umbrella; and as for *Lolita*, I've seen more eroticism in *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*.)



It was very late when we retired for the night. The bombshell wanted to sleep in my bed because (according to her) there is a ghost that lives on the upstairs landing of my house. I was too tired to give her a talk on the lack of statistical evidence as to the existence of paranormal phenomena.

In the morning, they took advantage of me and forced me to agree to take them to see the film *Muppet Treasure Island*. Later I watched them enthusiastically pour cereal into their bowls. I stood by with the milk and sugar bowl. 'We do our own milk and sugar,' they both said indignantly, so I left them to it. When I turned round again I saw that each child had a small mountain of sugar on the top of their cereal. Kilimanjaro sprang to mind. 'How could you?' I cried.

'I just said not too much sugar, didn't I?' 'But it's not too much sugar for us,' they said reasonably.

We took a taxi to the cinema. On the way, my grandson asked me in a loud voice several difficult questions about the solar system. The taxi driver laughed in a horrible, sneery way at my inept replies. He dropped us off at one of those dreary out-of-town leisure and entertainment complexes. As I looked around at the dull, low, red-brick buildings, I felt a deep loathing for the whole idea of formalized leisure and entertainment, and an urgent need to be at home reading a book. We went to a restaurant before the film started. But when I say restaurant, I want you to know that I use the term very loosely.

We stood obediently by a sign that said 'Please wait to be seated', but after a few minutes of being ignored by the

teenage waiting staff, we got bored and made our own way to a table. We studied the menu. Half an hour later, after much changing of minds and heated discussion among the three of us, a youth arrived with a hand-held computer to take our order. He apologized cheerfully for the delay. 'Nobody knows what they're doing, we're all nutters,' he added, nodding towards his colleagues who were larking about round the serving hatch.

The bombshell's choice, a jacket potato with cheese, drew a shake of the youth's head. 'Not after three o'clock,' he said. I wondered for a moment if a new law had been passed while I'd been out of the country. Was there now a curfew on baked potatoes?

My grandson gave his drink order: 'A chocolate milkshake, please, extra thick so that the straw stands up in it by itself.' I was proud of his attention to detail, and sad for him when the drink eventually came and the straw needed help to sit down, let alone stand up. The food was unbelievably vile and I now understood why so much of it littered the restaurant floor.

When the youth came to take our almost full plates away, he asked with a gormless smile, 'Everything all right?' 'No, it was horrible,' I said pleasantly. Equally pleasantly he replied, 'We're always busy on Sundays.' Still pleasantly I said, 'We won't be coming back on any day of the week.'

We filled up on popcorn and cola in the cinema. For the next ninety minutes I watched sourly as Kermit and Miss Piggy now cavorted about on Treasure Island, but I did turn every now and again to watch my grandchildren's lovely faces as they stared at the screen. I was happy to be



there with them. And I vowed to myself that I would be a better grandmother. I would read them Robert Louis Stevenson's masterpiece, *Treasure Island*, when we got home. I would put the damn stamp album away, I would scare the ghost from the upstairs landing and, finally, I would put three potatoes in the oven to bake.

## The Tourist

This is how he died. He went to Maria's Taverna for his usual coffee. Then he went to the fields to see his sheep, he called into his shop, went home feeling unwell, sat on the sofa and died.

The last time I saw the grocer alive was when I went into his long, dark shop to buy some of those blue tablets that slot into a plug-in anti-mosquito device, a tin of evaporated milk and a gaudy pink and white beach mat. He darted about as he always did, muttering in Greek; his voice sounded like rusty nails. There was no price label on the beach mat, nor on any of the other similar mats in the shop. He shouted something to a female in the back room and the female shouted back. To English ears it sounded as though they were having a marriage-ending quarrel, but I knew that all he had probably said to her was, 'How much are the pink and white beach mats?' And that her reply to him had probably been, 'I don't know, love.'

Everything about him was bony: his nose, his forehead and his limbs – his elbows could have cut cheese. I don't speak any Greek, apart from the essential pleasantries, so he mimed bafflement, bringing his shoulder blades up to his ears. I mimed back that I would pay what he asked: on the island of Skyros it is taken for granted that everyone is honest.



He went behind the battered shop counter and dragged a fat, dog-eared book from the shelf window. He rifled through the pages. Eventually he found the page he wanted and ran a thin brown finger down a column. I couldn't help but notice that the date at the top of the page ended 1991. He shook his head and threw the book back under the counter, then he took up the beach mat and examined it minutely again. A moment later he was outside in the street asking passers-by if they knew the price. Old women in black put down their shopping bags crammed with onions and aubergines and examined the beach mat. A small crowd of people gathered, each contributing to the debate. In the end a small boy was ordered to go to the haberdasher's down the hill. He came back with the information that the beach mat would cost me 250 drachmas. The grocer wrote the price out for me on a brown paper bag and I paid him, thanked him and left.

The next time I saw him was two days later, and he was being carried shoulder high in an open coffin. His bony, noble head was surrounded by fresh flowers. Somebody had shaved him and the skin on his face looked unfamiliarly smooth. The grocer's funeral was a big public event in the town of Skyros. He had been a very popular man, so businesses and shops closed for the morning. His daughters and sons hurried from Athens to be there on time (the dead have to be buried within twenty-four hours on Skyros as there are no facilities for storing bodies). Large crowds of grieving townsfolk lined the main street,

waiting for the coffin to be processed down the hill towards the graveyard.

Then, walking up the hill came three women and three men; obviously tourists. They looked about them with an air of amusement. One of the women was blonde and wearing shorts and a pink and white gingham bikini top. She was obviously anxious to avoid spoiling her tan with strap marks, so she had left the straps dangling so that her breasts were exposed. She was a truly shocking sight. A friend of mine, a lovely woman in her sixties, crossed the street and spoke politely to the blonde, telling her, 'A funeral is about to take place.' The blonde had a T-shirt hanging from her belt, and my friend indicated to her that she should cover herself. But the blonde (who was English) merely said excitedly to her friends, 'There's going to be a funeral,' and stepped forward to get a better view, so exposing herself even more.

Right until the last moment, when the coffin came into sight, I thought she would relent and put on her T-shirt. But she didn't, and the priest and the boys carrying holy artefacts, the grocer's crying sons and daughters and his friends who had loved him passed by the dumb English tourist who had so little respect for their dead. I watched their eyes flicker towards the shocking patch of pink and white and saw them register their disgust, and I cried behind my sunglasses and wanted to apologize to the grocer's family for the terrible disrespect the Englishwoman had shown towards their small town. When the crowds had dispersed the woman strolled up the street, oblivious



to the great insult she had caused the polite and courteous people of Skyros. My one consolation was the sight of her retreating back: the sunburned skin looked red and inflamed and I thought that unless she covered up very soon she could be suffering from agonizing sunburn by that evening. But I wasn't going to warn her. Quite honestly, I hoped she'd burn in hell.

## No Ideas

People are always writing to me and asking me where I get my ideas from. I'm tempted to reply (as John Cleese once did), 'I buy them from a little old woman who lives round the corner.'

If only that little old woman existed. I'd be there, outside her door, at the front of the queue, jostling with other desperate writers who have run out of ideas. Because, I'd better come clean, I've no idea what to write for this month's column. It's a grey day in an uninspiring month, nothing particularly interesting has happened to me, I've run out of ideas and I'm bored by my own company. Somebody once said, 'Writing is easy. All you have to do is to stare down at a blank piece of paper until your forehead bleeds.'

You may think this is nonsense, but I think I feel the first trickle of blood. It's not as though I am struggling against any editorial restrictions. If I wanted to say that John Major reminds me of Postman Pat, the trade restrictions imposed by America against Cuba should be lifted, or that schools are wasted on the young, I could say it. The editor is not a despot using his columnists to impose his extreme political views – 'Today Sainsbury's *The Magazine*, tomorrow the world!'

I once went to Russia, before communism became a



dirty word, and met a group of government-approved writers. What a sad bunch they were. You could tell that none of them had ever bled from the forehead. I wonder what they are doing for a living now, post-communism? They may well be criminals, crime currently being the growth industry in the country formerly known as Russia.

Good writers and good criminals have quite a lot in common. (By good criminals, I mean in the sense of being good at their job.) Both are inadequate, both give 10 per cent of their income to a 'fence' (a writer's fence is called an agent). And both are students of human fallibility. I'm a gormless trusting type myself so I have a foot in both camps. I could easily have fallen for a scam I read about some years ago. It went something like this. In bold black letters it said:

Do you want to be rich beyond your wildest dreams?  
Of course you do!!!!

Then, in slightly smaller letters, it went on:

I have a penthouse in London, a villa in Marbella, a powerboat, three high-performance cars. I drink champagne every day. I buy my suits from Savile Row...

This boasting continued at tedious length until near the bottom, in large letters, it said:

Yet I only work one day a week!!!!

(Incidentally, one exclamation mark is bad enough, but if you see six it's a sure sign that either a teenager or a criminal is behind them.) At the very bottom it said something like:

Send £5. Yes! Only £5! And find out how I finance my fabulous lifestyle. Send to: Rikki Conman, Unit One, Kray Way, Maxwell Industrial Park, Bentchester.

Hundreds of gullible fools sent their cash and cheques and postal orders to Rikki Conman and waited eagerly for his reply. And to be fair to Rikki, his reply came within a couple of weeks. And what did it say? Inside their stamped addressed envelope was a slip of paper on which was written four simple words:

Do as I do.

Diabolically clever, eh? I wonder where Rikki gets his ideas from? I've just got up from the table where I'm trying to work and paced about a bit, like expectant fathers used to do in black-and-white films. My eyes happened to fall on the magazine *Hello!* (note the exclamation mark), which just happened to be on the table because I just happened to have bought it at the garage. I've never bought it before, honest guy, but the cover was irresistible. Prince Edward is standing next to his fiancée, Sophie. He is dressed in a sort of sheet, she is dressed as a knight (though the grey polo-neck she is wearing under her ill-fitting tabard is from Marks & Sparks, or I'm a dingo).



I just happened to turn the pages and discovered that Edward and Sophie were among 1,000 guests at a costume party for a vulgar aristocrat (I won't give him the nitrogen of publicity). It must have been galling for the aristo, that his OTT costume didn't make the front cover, having been designed by an opera supremo and made up by a college of art. How he must have fulminated against the editorial policy that chose dull, sheet-bedecked royalty against mere aristo ostentation.

Anyway, if there are any little old women out there with ideas to sell, I'm in the market. You can tell from this month's column how desperate I am.

## Lost Bag

I was wandering around the red-light district in Amsterdam recently, shivering in a cutting wind (British Airways had managed to lose the bag with my warm sweater in it). The scantily dressed girls displaying themselves in the windows had portable heaters at their feet, but were still obviously cold. How they managed to look sultry at the same time is clearly a professional skill passed on to new recruits.

Sometimes, if you looked beyond the girls, you caught a glimpse of the bed where they exercised other skills. I was quite touched at how spartan and clean these beds appeared, and I dreaded to think how much their weekly laundry costs must be. Every bed was made up with white sheets and pillowcases. They looked like nice girls; the type you could take to tea with your old uncle without him becoming over-excited.

Some of the girls were reading books (I think business was slow that night); others had a piece of sewing on their naked laps. One rubber-clad siren was leaning on a tassel whip, talking and laughing with her friend, who had opted for the baby-doll look (though I have yet to see Hamleys selling baby dolls wearing white stockings and suspenders). It was all strangely innocent.

Window shopping in the red-light district becomes



monotonous after a while. There are identical goods for sale: the same pink plastic phalluses, the same bottles of love potions for ingestion or application, and the same seven-inch black patent stilettos. I was almost tempted to buy a pair of these shoes (my own high heels were in the bag with the warm sweater, in the care of BA). I was sick of wearing my dumpy training-type shoes. But I came to my senses. Those cobbles, my dears!

The next day I enquired at the hotel reception desk whether the lost bags had been returned. I kept my distance from the receptionist, conscious that by now, after wearing the same clothes for three days, I must . . . well . . . and toothpaste from the hotel, but I doubted if they kept an emergency wardrobe for guests parted from their luggage. There was only one thing for it. I had to buy new clothes. And it would be that rare thing, guilt-free shopping!

It was a moment of pure happiness. I shuffled my credit cards excitedly and set off for the shops. My spirits dampened slightly when I saw that the pavement was lined with beggars. I gave generously of my guilders, but being exposed to so much human misery took the edge off my euphoria. So when I passed through the revolving doors into the perfumed warmth of a department store, some of the guilt had returned.

I made my way up to Women's Clothing on the second floor, and was immediately plunged into a nightmare of choice. Rack upon rack of lovely clothes stretched into the far distance, and I swear, dear reader, I examined every

size label, every price tag of every garment that I would even consider wearing. When I glanced at my watch I couldn't believe the time. I had obviously fallen into some kind of retail black hole, wandered into another dimension: two hours had passed, and I was still wearing my stinking three-day-old clothes.

Exhausted and confused, I made my way to a café on the same floor. It was full of women like me. We wore that distracted look, the one that says that we are mentally cataloguing the old clothes in our wardrobes at home.

I don't speak or read Dutch, but I know that the first item on a Dutch menu is always the soup. So I pointed to the top of the menu when the waitress came, and settled back to more mental gymnastics. Would the orange padded waistcoat I'd seen go under the black leather jacket? Etc., etc. . . .

The soup came in a bowl as big as a Belisha beacon. It was full of meatballs and dumplings, and every vegetable grown on the earth. It was served with a foot and a half of French bread. I thanked her, but she hadn't finished. She came back and put down a dinner plate covered in wedges of international cheeses (I swear one was Red Leicester), then she placed a salad bowl, big enough to bath a baby in, on the table. Next came a three-storey apple cake and a jug of cream. The final item was the only one I was pleased to see: a large glass of champagne.

When she saw my alarm (what was coming next? A boar's head? A roast ox?) she explained in halting English that I had ordered the set lunch. When her back was turned I shovelled some of the cheese into my handbag,



but the table was still groaning, and what was meant to be a ten-minute stop to think turned into a forced-feed lasting an hour.

I went back into the shop and bought the orange padded waistcoat. It fits under the jacket, but it isn't warm, it doesn't cover my bum and when I got back to England and looked out of the train I saw a whole lot of Railtrack maintenance men in orange waistcoats similar to mine. Too similar. I blame British Airways.

## Christmas in Tobago

I know it's April, but I didn't tell you about my Christmas in Tobago. We packed our suitcases during a Christmas party (immediate family only – nobody else could have tolerated the juxtaposition of mince pies and mosquito repellent on the table).

In the preceding week I'd finished the first draft of a new book, rewritten a film script and Christmas-shopped until I was completely demented. It was a peculiar party: my sister nobly ironed my holiday clothes while I opened my Christmas presents – a huge straw hat from one daughter, a sarong from another.

The departure hall at Gatwick was reminiscent of those medieval paintings depicting hell, where tormented souls mill around for eternity. Nobody actually poked us with a three-pronged fork, but they fed us misinformation followed by no information until we were in a state of total dependency, like the cowed population of a totalitarian state. If I was in charge of Gatwick airport, I would lay on complimentary drinks for those in the check-in queues, and some sort of live entertainment. Actors could join the queue and stage a scripted family row – something meaty that would keep us all riveted until it was our turn to reach the check-in desk and discover that our passports were at home on top of the fridge.